



# Betsy

Orlan Orphans, Book 8

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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OSBOURNE

## Betsy

Orlan Orphans Book 8



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## Introduction

Betsy Sanders loves her life. She has a wonderful and often boisterous family. She has a job for a man who makes her a bit crazy, but it's good honest work, and she makes a decent wage. When a new man starts working for the auction house, she feels immediately drawn to him.

Charles Brooks has been left with the burden of four younger siblings to raise. When he begins working for the local auction house, he's interested in getting to know the young lady who works there better. He hires her to help him with his home and younger siblings in an attempt to draw closer to her. His siblings immediately love her. Will Betsy's fear of getting too close too fast keep them apart? Or will Charles be able to convince her she's a necessary part of his life?

Betsy Sanders hurried along down the main street of Nowhere, TX, holding her skirt up so she wouldn't trip. She hated to be late for work.

When she finally arrived at the town auction house, she rushed around to the back and unlatched the gate. She pushed open the large black door and rushed into the building.

"It's nearly half-past eight." Mr. Fitzsimmons, the proprietor, pushed up his glasses and pressed his lips together.

"I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again." Betsy flushed with embarrassment. She had been helping her mother, Edna Petunia, bake a chocolate cake that the family would enjoy for dessert that evening.

After marrying at an advanced age, Edna Petunia and her husband, Cletus Sanders, had adopted fifteen orphans when they'd arrived in Nowhere from New York. Although there should have been a home waiting for the girls in Nowhere, a mix-up had meant they'd arrived in Texas without a roof over their heads. Thankfully, Edna Petunia had convinced her husband to take the girls in.

Since then, life hadn't been the same for Betsy or her sisters. They lived in a beautiful, spacious home. They had nice clothes and shoes to wear. They had hot meals and delicious baked goods available whenever they wanted. Best of all, they had two devoted—if overprotective—parents who would do anything for them. Although Edna Petunia hadn't given birth to them, she loved all the girls just as fiercely as if they were her own, and strived to make sure their lives were filled with joy.

When they'd come to Texas five years ago, they'd all lived under the same roof at the house Cletus had inherited from his parents. In recent years, some of the older girls had married and now lived with their husbands—and children, in some cases—in other houses in and around Nowhere.

As Betsy grabbed a mop and a pail from the cleaning closet, she imagined herself one day getting married and moving out of the house. It was hard to even dream about. She knew she wanted to find a man who was special to her and have his children. But she was shy and quiet and never able to talk to the few men she came across that she wasn't related to. It was even difficult for her to speak to old, crotchety Mr. Fitzsimmons—and there was no way he would ever be special to her.

Cletus said it was simply a matter of confidence, and she only needed to practice talking to men more. But the fact was, there weren't that many eligible young men in Nowhere that were available for Betsy to practice talking to.

For the time being, that suited her just fine. She was busy doing chores around the house, working at the auction house, and helping her sisters out with her growing nieces and nephews. This left very little time for anything else.

As Betsy mopped the floor, Mr. Fitzsimmons sniffed and coughed. She knew that meant he thought she should scrub harder. He came over to watch her work, and Betsy saw that he was nodding in approval, even though he still wore a frown on his face.

"You'll need to clean out the alcove in the back." No matter what Mr. Fitzsimmons said, he always sounded disapproving. Betsy tried not to let it affect her. "My new apprentice will need to use it. He'll be here every weekday at nine o'clock."

Betsy nodded. "Yes, sir." She wrung the excess water out of the mop into the pail and brushed the dry mop across the floor. Next, she took the mop and pail into the alcove, just outside the room where the auctions took place.

Betsy stared at the messy space. It was filled with stacks of dusty boxes and chairs. She decided to dust first, then mop. Betsy carefully took down the top chair, got an old rag, and started to clean it off. She knew she needed to work fast or Mr. Fitzsimmons would be upset.

Before she could start mopping, there was a loud knock at the front entrance.

"Betsy, the door!" Mr. Fitzsimmons bellowed from the auction floor. Betsy hurried through the hall to the front entrance.

She unlocked the door and pulled it open. Standing before her was the most attractive man she'd ever seen. He was dressed in a brown tailored suit and shiny new cowboy boots. He took off his Stetson and held it at his chest — which Betsy noticed was broad and strong.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, miss. I'm Charles Brooks, and I'm here to see Mr. Fitzsimmons."

Betsy could not speak. Her mind raced frantically, but no words came from her lips. Her cheeks burned a bright red color. Charles smiled, and she saw he had a mouth full of perfectly even, white teeth.

"Are you all right?" Charles kept smiling, but he also furrowed his brow to show his concern. The woman in front of him was a beauty, there was no doubt about it. She seemed much too shy to realize how her looks affected others. Her beauty shone through, despite her plain clothing and the layer of dust that seemed to cover her from head to toe. Aside from the dust, he could get used to a view like her.

Mr. Fitzsimmons barreled into the entrance.

"Don't just stand there, Betsy—get back to work!" Mr. Fitzsimmons pumped Charles Brooks' hand enthusiastically. "Welcome, welcome. Very glad to have you here."

Betsy wanted to crawl into a hole and die from embarrassment, but she took a deep breath and went back to the alcove instead. There was plenty more to clean, and this Mr. Brooks would need a place to sit sooner or later.

She couldn't hear what Mr. Fitzsimmons was saying, but he led Charles into the auction room, where the bidding took place from one to five o'clock each weekday. She busied herself with mopping the alcove area. When she was finished, she set out a chair and dusted the desk so the new man would have a place to sit and work. She wasn't sure exactly what he was supposed to be doing, but she knew he would at least need a desk and some writing space.

"Your name is Betsy?"

Betsy nearly jumped. Charles Brooks was standing almost right next to her, and Mr. Fitzsimmons was nowhere to be found. She looked up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly lunchtime. She normally walked down to the mercantile only a few blocks away to eat lunch with one of her older sisters. Ruby's husband, Lewis, ran the mercantile, and Ruby was always happy to spend time with her sisters.

She nodded, feeling her cheeks flush again. She knew she was normally speechless in front of men, but this was a little ridiculous.

"Can you talk?" A mixture of concern and sympathy crossed over Charles's face.

She nodded again.

"Okay. Just not to me?"

Betsy willed her body to cooperate with her mind. "Yes, sir. I can speak just fine."

"Oh, good! I was worried it would be awfully quiet in here if you couldn't talk." Charles looked around the alcove. "I take it this is my desk. Thank you for setting it all up for me."

Betsy glowed, pleased at his compliment. She loved hearing his approving tone. "It was no problem."

"Well, I appreciate it all the same. I believe this means I owe you a kindness in the future." Charles looked Betsy straight in the eyes as he spoke, and Betsy was overtaken with a feeling she'd never had before. Her entire insides felt like they were on fire, and she had a sudden need to be as close to Charles as possible.

Charles saw Betsy's eyes glaze over and her body start to tilt slightly to her left. He grabbed her arm to steady her. "Are you all right?"

Charles blinked her eyes rapidly. Strong, handsome Charles Brooks was holding her arm! She felt sparks of excitement shoot throughout her body.

"I'm fine." Betsy stared at the ground. It was too hard to look back into Charles's gaze. Every time she looked up at him, she felt like he could tell everything she was thinking.

"Well, Betsy, I'm looking forward to working with you."

Betsy smiled and took her cleaning supplies into the auction hall. It was mostly clean, but she liked to dust before lunch. She knew if she didn't, Mr. Fitzsimmons would find something wrong and complain about it later.

Charles took his lunch at the desk in the alcove. As the clock approached one, he and Mr. Fitzsimmons went into the auction hall. Nowhere residents began to trickle in and take their seats. Each of them had a paddle that they would use to bid during the auction.

Betsy rarely paid attention to the auctions themselves. Today was different, though. She watched as Mr. Fitzsimmons introduced Charles, and the younger man took the stand to conduct the auction. Charles seemed confident and knowledgeable, even though she knew it was his first time.

Betsy spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning the windows from the inside, glad that she could still hear bits of conversation from inside the auction hall.

"Going once, going twice—"

"—To the man in the third row!"

"She's a beaut, I must admit—"

"One-of-a-kind, antique, cherry walnut—"

Betsy sighed. She couldn't wait to see what treasures were in store for her that evening. After all the buyers had left, she dusted off everything that was still left in the hall. She loved her job because she saw new things every day.

At five o'clock, Mr. Fitzsimmons went over the money they'd collected with Charles, wrote out a deposit slip, and took it to the bank. He asked Betsy to make sure she closed up when she left. Betsy nodded. Mr. Fitzsimmons always reminded her, although she never needed to be told.

"What time do you usually leave?" Charles walked over to the windows to stand by Betsy. She could feel her heart beating faster.

"I leave by five-thirty, usually." Betsy was proud she was able to get out an entire sentence. Charles looked amused.

"And where do you live?"

"I live here in Nowhere."

"With your husband, I suppose?"

Betsy's face felt like it was on fire when she heard this question. She shook her head. Charles grinned. It seemed like he was enjoying the fact that he made her so uncomfortable.

Betsy took a deep breath. "If you'll excuse me, I do have chores to attend to."

"I'm sure you do. But I'd like to show you something before you go." Charles had a mischievous expression on his face.

Betsy had a bad feeling about this. She was curious about what Charles might have to show her, but she also knew Mr. Fitzsimmons would be furious if the place wasn't completely spotless tomorrow morning.

"Please?" Charles begged her with his eyes. "It will only take a few moments."

"Well, all right." Betsy grudgingly followed him as he stepped back into the auction hall. She tried not to think about all the dust she already saw on the furniture, art frames, and machines. Charles led her through the tables of items that would be up for auction the following day. When they came to the end of one of the rows, he stopped and pointed.

It was the most beautiful teapot Betsy had ever seen. It was porcelain with blue details, and it came with not only the pot, but also a kettle and four teacups.

"We got this in just today. I think it'll bring a fortune. It's a genuine antique." Charles held the teapot so Betsy could touch it. She put out a finger nervously.

"It's beautiful." She admired the simple yet elegant pattern. "I love it."

"I thought you might like it. It reminded me of the design on your dress."

Betsy blushed. He had noticed her dress? Her sister Penny had sewn it for her, and it was one of her favorites. The thought that a man like Charles Brooks would notice the details on a shy nobody like herself was hard to believe.

"My sister made it for me." Betsy felt like she was starting to get more comfortable talking to him. It wasn't so bad, because he nodded and smiled at her encouragingly.

"Ah, you have a sister. I think that's the first detail about your life that you've shared with me."

"I actually have fourteen sisters."

"Okay...you're going to have to explain that!" Charles laughed.

"I never knew my parents. They died when I was small, and I lived with fourteen other girls in an orphanage in New York."

"New York! How'd you end up all the way in Nowhere?"

"A few years ago, the church that ran the orphanage felt it was wrong for boys and girls to live together under one roof. Our matron at the time traveled with us. We took a bus here to Texas, and we were supposed to live in a new home." Betsy felt shy when she mentioned the "under one roof" part, but made herself keep going.

"What happened?"

"There was no house ready and waiting for us. But we were very lucky. A newlywed couple, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, decided to adopt all of us."

"Oh! You're one of the Sanders sisters!" Charles laughed in recognition.

"You know of us?"

"I think everyone in the town of Nowhere has at least heard of you. I've met your sister who works at the mercantile, too."

"Yes, that's Ruby!"

"You don't suppose they'd want to take on a few more orphans, would they?" Charles's words had to be a joke, but his face was serious.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm an orphan like you. And I have three younger brothers – Matthew, Samuel, and David, and one younger sister, Amy. I'm their only caretaker, now that my parents are gone. And I'm not any good at it." For the first time since she had met him, Charles's cheerful, happy expression was gone. In its place was a sullen frown.

"What's wrong?" The words were out of Betsy's mouth before she even realized she was speaking.

"I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not a parent. Our house is a mess, I can't cook, and they don't ever listen to me."

"How old are they?"

"Matthew is the oldest. He's ten. Sammy is nine, David is seven, and Amy is five." Charles spoke of his siblings proudly, and Betsy could tell that he cared for them deeply.

"I don't have children myself, obviously. But a few of my sisters do. And I know from visiting them that it's hard work. You can't let yourself get down about it. Your brothers and sister are lucky to have you."

Charles smiled. "That's kind of you to say. But you should see where we live. It's messier than a hog's stall. The mess isn't the worst part, though. I don't know how to be a parent to my brothers and sister. They think of me as their brother."

"That must be very difficult. When did your parents pass?"

"It's been less than a year. So we're all still struggling with it."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Betsy couldn't imagine the pain of losing Edna Petunia and Cletus. Her birth parents had died when she was just a baby, which sheltered her from feeling grief when she thought about them. It was sad that they were dead, but she couldn't remember anything from when they were alive.

"Hey, I have an idea." Charles's smile returned to his handsome face.

"What's that?"

"What if you came to the house after work a few days each week to help clean up around the house? It would be a huge help to me."

Betsy took a deep breath. She wanted to spend more time with Charles, but she was busy with her work at the auction house, and she barely knew him. "I need to think on it."

"Of course. I understand."

Charles collected his things and put his hat back on before he left for the day. "Can I walk you home, Betsy?"

Betsy couldn't stop a smile from spreading across her face. She reminded herself that she had just met the man in front of her, and didn't know a thing about him.

"I'm fine today. But you have a good evening. I'll give you my answer tomorrow."

"That's wonderful, Betsy. You have a good evening, too."

When Charles left the building, Betsy slumped down into a chair, feeling both excited and exhausted after their conversation. What was she getting herself into?



When Betsy returned home, the house was abuzz with activity. Her sister Dorothy and her husband Carter were visiting with their son, Philip. They lived in a lovely home on the edge of Nowhere. Carter practiced law alongside Cletus.

Edna Petunia was making silly faces at the baby in the kitchen, while Gertrude, another one of Betsy's sisters, was frowning as she helped to prepare vegetables for dinner. Gertrude was a librarian and almost always wore a sour expression on her face, even when she wasn't peeling an onion. Hattie and Katie, the two youngest girls, giggled as Philip reached toward Edna Petunia's bosom. He—like the rest of the family—knew that was where she kept her peppermint sticks.

"There's my little auctioneer!" Cletus said proudly as she walked into the family room.

Betsy giggled. "I just sweep the floors."

"You keep them in business, Betsy. If it weren't for you, I'm sure the whole place would have gone bankrupt by now."

Betsy smiled softly. "Work was fine today."

Cletus detected a hint of something in her words. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing—"

"Betsy's got a secret! Tell us, tell us!" Theresa shouted.

Hope brought a plate of chocolate chip cookies into the family room and began passing them around. Cletus took a handful.

"Don't go spoiling dinner, now!" Gertrude's shrill voice could be heard from the kitchen. "There's cake for dessert!"

"What's your secret, Betsy?" Theresa never forgot anything.

"Absolutely nothing at all!"

"Yes, but you've got a sly smile on your face as if you are hiding something." Cletus Sanders was no fool. He knew when one of his daughters was trying to sneak something past him.

"It's nothing, really." Betsy knew she was blushing again. The number of times her face had turned red that day had to be a record.

"Please, Betsy! You have to tell us!" Katie chimed in as she came into the family room.

"There's a new collector at the auction house. He wants me to work for him!" Finally, Betsy blurted out her news. She hated attention, but she realized her family wasn't going to let her off the hook.

"And quit your work at the auction house?" Cletus frowned. It was a steady, well-paying job, and those could be hard to come by in a small town like Nowhere.

"No, that's the best part. I would do it after work, a few days a week. He has four younger siblings he's raising on his own."

"He does? What happened to his parents?" Theresa wanted to know.

"They died. He didn't say how, but it was recently."

"Oh, my. That's just awful." Hope grabbed another cookie.

"Well, I don't know how I feel about you spending so much time with another family. You already work a full-time job." Cletus looked sternly at Betsy. He loved that his daughters were so independent and hard-working, but he also felt it was his job to teach them balance. He loved his job, but he also loved his wife and family, and the life they'd built together.

Betsy felt sad as she thought about Charles all by himself, trying to raise his siblings. "Cletus, he's really hurting. I could tell from the way he talked to me about it. I believe I could really help this man and his family. That's what we learn about in church every week, isn't it? Helping our neighbors?"

Cletus smiled. "You've got me there, Betsy."

Just then, Edna Petunia came into the family room. "Dinner's ready! Where's Betsy got you, Cletus?" She leaned down and gave him a big kiss on the lips. Betsy still hadn't gotten used to all the affection her parents showed one another. It was wonderful that they loved each other so much, but they seemed like a pair of teenagers the way they constantly were kissing and hugging.

"Betsy has gotten herself a second job." Cletus couldn't help but be impressed.

"I didn't accept it yet—" Betsy tried to explain.

"There's a man involved!" Theresa shouted as she and the others joined the rest of the family in the kitchen. The table was set with two extra places for Dorothy and Carter, and Katie sat with Philip on her lap, giving his busy parents a break.

Betsy sighed. She loved her family, but they sure knew how to make a mountain out of a molehill.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT DAY AT WORK, Betsy waited until Mr. Fitzsimmons had gone home for the day before she said anything to Charles. She didn't want Mr. Fitzsimmons to get the wrong idea.

"I've thought about it, and I can help you with cleaning around the house."

Charles's face broke out into a huge, relieved grin. "Thank you so much, Betsy. You have no idea how much this means to me."

Betsy nodded in response. She felt nervous, but also excited.

"Are you ready to leave for the day?" Charles put his hat on. Betsy nodded. She grabbed her sweater and keys and locked up for the day.

Charles led Betsy down one of the side streets in Nowhere until they came to a small, dilapidated house. The step creaked as Betsy stepped onto the porch. Surely, the family couldn't live in such a place. But Charles pulled a key from his pocket and entered the house. He motioned for her to come inside.

Betsy immediately smelled something rotten, but before she could think of what it could be, she was hit in the stomach and knocked to the ground.

"David!" Charles yelled in frustration and picked up a small boy off of Betsy. Charles set the boy aside and bent down to help Betsy up.

"I am so sorry about this." Charles looked mortified about his brother's behavior, but Betsy thought he should be embarrassed about the smell instead. She still couldn't figure out what it was or where it was coming from—but she was going to have to do something about it. She could barely breathe.

"David, you must be more careful about running in the house! You could have hurt Betsy!" Charles sternly reprimanded his brother. "Everyone, come in here!" Charles waited until all three boys and a tiny girl were lined up in a row. The little girl was smiling shyly at Betsy, and Betsy immediately felt a pang of love in her heart for the sweet child. "Everyone, this is Betsy. She will be here three days per week to help us around the house. You will listen to her and respect her. Is that clear?"

The children all nodded their heads at their older brother.

"Okay. Good." Charles turned to Betsy. "Introduce yourselves to her, please."

"I'm Betsy, and I'm going to help your brother out around the house. You know, he's very busy, and he works hard to make sure you all have what you need. I'm not your new mama, but I hope I'll be your friend." Betsy was pleased with what she'd said, since she wanted to let the girl down gently, but she saw Charles shaking his head and frowning. She would have to ask him what that was about later.

"Now it's time for you all to get out of the way. We need some grown-up time." Charles looked sternly at the children and they dispersed...David bounded outside first, followed by the rest of his siblings at a slower pace. "I'll show you the kitchen next."

Charles walked a few feet into the kitchen, which was smaller and filthier than the front room had been. Pots and pans were piled high in the sink. There seemed to be a stove in the corner, but you couldn't get to it because there were crates filled with sacks of flour and produce all over.

Charles watched Betsy carefully. She seemed to be struggling to keep a neutral face, and he was worried she would run away from the house and never come back again. He was ashamed of how messy the house had become, but every time he tried to clean it up, it just went right back to being messy again a day or two later. He knew he needed help, and that Betsy was exactly the person to give it.

After the kitchen, Charles brought Betsy into the single bedroom. There was one bed in the middle of the room, and almost everything was covered in several inches of dust. There was a stack in the corner of clothes covered in dirt that was nearly as tall as Samuel. "The younger kids share the bed, and Matthew stays here." Charles pointed to a cot underneath the room's only window.

"Where do you sleep?" Betsy flushed red as she spoke the words.

"Usually in the front room, there's a straw mat I put out on the floor."

Betsy nodded in understanding. Back in New York, there had been a few times when some of the girls had to sleep on the floor. And there were times when Cletus slept on the floor of his own bedroom, claiming it was good for his back.

Betsy saw a lovely large blue vase on the floor next to the cot. It seemed out of place in the disarray. "What's that?"

"That was my mother's vase. She loved to put fresh flowers in it—it was passed down throughout her family for years. Matthew likes to have it near when he sleeps."

"Well, it's absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you." Charles paused for a moment and stared at Betsy, trying to gauge her reaction. "And that's the house."

"All right, then. I'll start in the kitchen!" Betsy's tone was bright, but she was a little worried that she would be there all evening cleaning. "You didn't mention anything about cooking. What do you plan on having for dinner?"

Charles's face fell. "I forgot about that today! I was so excited to bring you here—I usually just make a stew."

"A disgusting stew!" one of the children yelled from the other room. Betsy stifled a laugh.

"It turns out I'm actually a decent cook. I've been learning from Edna Petunia. If you show me where a few things are, I can make you something for dinner tonight."

"Really?" Charles seemed giddy at the prospect of Betsy preparing a meal. "Anything other than stew would be a real treat. I'll pay you a higher wage, of course. You

really don't mind?"

"Not at all. I think I'll enjoy it. I'll get more practice at cooking. In our house, Edna Petunia is in charge of the kitchen. Come to think of it, she's in charge of just about everything." Betsy explored the tiny pantry and decided to make a chicken pot pie.

"By the way, Charles?"

"What is it?"

"Earlier with the children. It seemed like you didn't like it when I said I'd be their friend. Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh – I want to make it clear to them that you and I are the adults in this house, and therefore the authorities. Otherwise, they'll only misbehave and form bad habits."

Betsy nodded. She thought Charles was going overboard, but they were his siblings, and he was in charge. "I understand."

"Thank you, Betsy."

She cleared off a section of the narrow table and got to work. As she worked, Charles gathered the children in the front room and began reading to them. Amy and Samuel listened quietly, but David couldn't stop getting up and racing around the house. Since Matthew was older and more advanced in his studies, he went into the bedroom and worked on some lessons.

Betsy had her work cut out for her. She finished rolling the crust and put the filling inside, then made her way through the mess to the stove. While it was baking, she found some old rags in the bedroom. She ripped them into smaller pieces and began dusting the kitchen as quickly as she could. Next, she got out the mop. There were still so many things she needed to do, but she thought if she got the kitchen in order, that would be a start.

The pot pie had cooked in no time at all, and Betsy gathered the children and Charles into the kitchen for their dinner. When Betsy heard the church bells chime eight o'clock, she gasped.

"I had no idea it was so late! I need to get home or my family will be worried about me."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner? This looks delicious." Charles looked hopeful, and Betsy hated to disappoint him.

"No, they said they'd save me a plate. Thank you for the offer, though."

"Thank you, Betsy. Let me walk you out."

As Betsy and Charles walked toward the front door, David tried to sneak a bit of the pot pie.

"David, you'd better not touch that pie until I've served you a slice!" Charles's voice boomed loudly. David sheepishly pulled his hand back.

"Are you sure you don't want me to walk you home?" Charles looked out into the dusk. Nowhere was a very safe town, but he didn't like the idea of Betsy walking on her own.

"I'll be fine. I'd rather you ate a hot dinner." Betsy smiled.

"Well, thank you. You've done so much for us tonight."

"It was barely a start. I am looking forward to when I come back on Friday. I have a lot left to do to get things in shape."

Charles pressed Betsy's hand into his. "Thank you, Betsy. You have no idea how much this means to me."

Betsy felt her entire body reacting to Charles's touch. She could have stood on the front porch like that for the rest of the evening without complaining. It felt wrong when she finally pulled away from him, but she knew she needed to get back. Her family would be worried sick.

"Good night. I'll see you tomorrow at the auction house."

"Good night, Betsy."

As Betsy hurried home, all she could think about was the incredible warmth of Charles's hand in hers.

F or the next few days, work at the auction house seemed interminable. Nothing seemed to be to Mr. Fitzsimmon's liking, and both Betsy and Charles felt the wrath of his displeasure. But each evening, after the older man left, Charles would show Betsy something incredible he'd found in the auction lot. Sometimes it was a beautiful old leather-bound book or journal, a unique piece of jewelry, or even an ornate spyglass.

Betsy loved the late afternoons when she had Charles and the auction house to herself. She also loved being at the Brooks' house, but it was much more chaotic with all the children around. She found herself adjusting to the new arrangement quickly. The children were sweet. They certainly could be unruly and mischievous at times but they had good hearts.

Betsy made slow but steady progress around the house. The first step was dusting all the surfaces in every room and mopping the entire floor. She picked up all the clothes in the bedroom, washed them, and hung them up to dry on a line outside. She organized the pantry and labeled all of the food so Charles would know what he had and what he needed. She also taught the children how to keep their house tidy.

"You're a natural. You know that, right?" Charles said one evening, a look of wonder on his face.

"A natural at what?" Betsy was washing dishes as David dried them.

Charles walked up to Betsy and spoke quietly. "At being a mother."

Heat rushed to Betsy's cheeks, and she looked down at the sink. "Oh, I'm just doing what any woman would do in this situation."

"You and I both know that's not true." With that, Charles slipped back into the front room, where he was reading a book.

"I dried all the dishes, can I go play now?" Even though David was learning to help out, he still had very little patience.

Betsy laughed at his eager face. "Sure, David." She began to put the last of the dishes back in the cupboard.

Less than a minute later, she and Charles heard a loud crash in the bedroom. They both went running in.

David was on the ground, his little face frozen in an expression of horror. Lying next to him in pieces was his mother's prized vase. Betsy had never seen Charles look so angry. His face turned an ugly dark red.

"I've told you a thousand times to be more careful! Look what you've done!" he yelled at his younger brother. David began to sob.

"There, there." Betsy stepped a little closer to David. "Don't move too much. I don't want you to get hurt on any sharp edges." She took her handkerchief and wiped his tear-streaked face. Charles stormed out of the room in disgust.

Betsy carefully helped David up and he curled up on the bed, still crying. She got a broom and a dustpan and began to sweep up the bigger pieces of the vase. While she was cleaning, Amy came in the room.

"What happened to Mama's vase?" The little girl looked forlornly from the pile of broken glass to David, who was rocking back and forth on the bed.

"There was a little accident. Nothing to worry about." Betsy tried to soothe her, but Charles stomped back into the room, and Amy jumped back in fear.

"You were very bad, David. As your punishment, no dessert or treats and no playing outside for the next two weeks."

"But Charlie—" David sat up in protest.

"I will not discuss this any further. You ruined Mother's favorite vase! We can never get it back!"

Betsy had never heard Charles speak so cruelly before. She didn't know what to do. She hated to see Charles yelling at his siblings like that. They were only children. But she didn't want to disrespect him in his own home.

"May I speak to you a moment?" Betsy finally decided to ask. Charles looked confused, but followed her out to the front room. "I really think it was an accident. David feels very badly."

"It was all I had left." Charles spoke softly, holding his temple as if it were in pain.

Betsy didn't know how to comfort him. "I'm so sorry."

"What am I doing, Betsy?" Charles's eyes were shining. Betsy gently wrapped her arms around him, and he lowered his head onto her shoulder. Her heart rate seemed to double, and she tried to steady herself with deep breaths.

"It will be all right. I don't know how, but I promise you, things will work out." She didn't know where her words were coming from, but they felt true, and they seemed to ease Charles's mind. They stood like that for a few moments until the silence was broken by Matthew, who had been playing outside.

"Are you two going to kiss?" Matthew demanded.

Betsy jumped back from Charles. "I should get back to the dishes."

Charles glared at his brother. "You shouldn't ask impolite questions, Matthew."

Matthew laughed and went into the bedroom. Charles came into the kitchen and watched as Betsy dusted the pantry.

Charles looked genuinely remorseful. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I know I lose my temper sometimes with the children."

"It's understandable that you would be upset about losing your mother's vase. It was very special to her." Betsy didn't completely understand what he was going through, but her heart went out to him.

"I think the children need more structure. I'm going to take away their toys and limit their outdoor time. They'll help you with chores or do their lessons, and that's it." Charles's expression was firm.

"Are you sure about that?" Betsy wasn't sure why she was talking back to Charles. After all, he was paying her to do what he told her to do. She had no right to tell him how to raise his own siblings. He was their guardian, not her.

"Yes, I'm absolutely sure. And I need you, as the other adult that the children see, to reinforce that with them. Is that clear?" Charles's tone was cold toward Betsy—nothing like the sad, scared man who had laid his head on her shoulder a few minutes before.

Betsy nodded. "That's clear."

Charles was making it perfectly clear...she was his employee and nothing else. Betsy vowed that she would stop thinking about Charles's strong hands or broad shoulders. If he wanted a firm authority figure, that's what she'd be.

\* \* \*

"MATTHEW, hush! Help your sister sound out the words." Betsy was cleaning out the icebox. Charles was still at the auction house, but had asked her to make sure the children were doing their lessons at home and get started on dinner. She knew he would be back any minute.

The boys were in a rare state. Matthew was talking nonstop about a new automobile he'd seen in town. Samuel and David had found an empty crate and were taking turns hiding inside it. But that was how children were when their toys were taken away—they'd make a game out of anything. Only Amy was patiently sitting and paying attention.

Betsy knew Charles would be upset if he came home and found that the children were not studying. But at the same time, she also felt that the children needed time to stretch out and play. It seemed wrong that they were being cooped up in their little house all the time. It was summer, so they didn't even have school as an excuse for why they could leave the house.

Charles had insisted on a strict schedule. When he got home from the auction house, the children were to begin on their lessons and help with chores. They rotated turns helping with dinner and cleaning each night. They were in bed by eight o'clock each night. What they did while he was at work was up to them, but he inspected the house as soon as he got home to make sure they didn't cause more of a mess.

Betsy was happy for the help with the cleaning—the house was certainly in much better condition now—but she felt sorry for the children. They were clearly unhappy, so she tried to think of small games she could play with them that could distract them from their chores.

She thought about saying something to Charles, but he had a point. The children had food, shelter, and books. Technically, they had everything they needed. Betsy just thought they deserved a little bit more.

"Betsy? Could we go outside and look at the stars? Papa used to show them to us, and we haven't done that in a long while." Samuel was tugging at Betsy's sleeve.

"I'm sorry, Samuel. Tonight we have chores and lessons to finish."

"We never do anything fun!" David joined in the protest.

"It's not fair!" Matthew shouted.

Even little Amy stuck out her lower lip. "I want to do something fun, too."

"You have your lessons, and that's that. Now, let's start fixing dinner. That will be a nice break from reading." Betsy tried to keep her voice even and firm. She wanted to make sure she was doing exactly what Charles had asked of her. But it was so difficult when she looked at the children's sweet faces.

Amy walked up to the icebox and stared right at Betsy. "You seemed nice at first. But now you're not nice." Betsy's eyes started to well up, but she remembered Charles saying she had to be consistent, no matter what.

"I'm sorry you think that, Amy. But right now, we need to cook dinner before your brother gets home. Can you go hand me one of the pots from that cupboard?"

Amy dutifully found a pot for Betsy, and she thanked the young girl. Betsy knew she was doing exactly what she was supposed to...so why did she feel so rotten?

When Charles got home, he saw that dinner—fried chicken—was on the table, and the house was spotless. He looked at Betsy approvingly. They had been following his system for a few weeks, and she had clearly taken his instructions to heart.

"This looks wonderful."

Betsy tried not to think about the way Charles looked in a suit, or to imagine his hand pressing against hers again. She fought hard not to think about what it would feel like to be wrapped up in his arms. She forced herself to stop thinking about what his lips might taste like on hers...

"Are you all right, Betsy?" Charles looked concerned.

"I'm fine. I should get going." Betsy hoped her face hadn't betrayed her thoughts and feelings about Charles. The truth was, ever since she had started coming to the Brooks' house, she couldn't stop thinking about him. He was always on her mind.

She knew it was foolish, but she imagined moving into their house and living there all the time. She would help with the children and be a constant presence in their lives, instead of just showing up three days a week and trying to be stern.

Charles poured himself a glass of water. "Actually, why don't you stay tonight?"

"I should be going home. It's getting late."

"You always cook these delicious meals, and then you leave. Please, you should enjoy this meal with us. I'll walk you home after, since it will be late."

Betsy eyed the door, then looked at Charles. His eyes looked almost hopeful. She knew it wasn't going to help her get him out of her mind, but she didn't care. "Okay, I'll stay. Thank you."

Charles's face brightened immediately. "Children, let's show Betsy some appreciation for all of her amazing cooking." He began to set the table—Betsy was shocked to see a man set a table—and motioned for Matthew to start serving the fried chicken. Samuel went outside and picked a few flowers, and Charles put them in a glass in the center of the table.

Betsy sighed contentedly as the children began to eat their food. This feeling was absolute bliss. Charles was relaxed and smiling in a way she hadn't seen in weeks. The children were behaving—maybe the strict routine had been working, after all.

After dinner, Charles allowed the children to have some ice cream for the first time in weeks. David jumped up and did a little dance. After seeing Charles's serious expression, he sat back down again.

Once the children had finished their ice cream, Betsy tucked them all into bed. Matthew didn't really need tucking in, but when Betsy offered, he accepted.

"Goodnight, children."

"Goodnight, Betsy!" They sounded so sweet when they were sleepy and tucked under the covers. They seemed like totally different children than they had been just a few hours before. Betsy shook her head. She still had a lot to learn about raising children and families. What she did know was that this one felt good. She closed the door quietly, then went back into the kitchen and finished washing the dishes.

When she had finished drying the last pot, she gathered her things and found Charles in the front room, looking through an old hat box.

"What's that?" She was curious. She hadn't seen it around the house before.

"Just some old books and notes my mother kept. This is her Bible." He handed Betsy a faded, heavy Bible. She turned to the first page and saw his mother's name in neat cursive script. Next to it was the name of Charles's father, and below it, the names of their five children.

"I'm so glad you have this to remember them by. It's beautiful."

Charles seemed off in his own little world. "Thank you." He remembered where he was. "I'm so sorry. I need to be getting you home, not boring you with stories about my parents."

"You're not boring to me—ever." Betsy still felt shy when she spoke to Charles so directly, but she wanted him to know that she truly enjoyed talking to him.

Charles put the scraps of paper and books back into the box, then went into the kitchen and put them back on the top shelf of the pantry where Betsy couldn't reach. So that was why she hadn't seen the box before.

On the walk home, Charles offered Betsy his arm, and she took it. She felt wonderfully safe with Charles by her side.

He tried to get her to talk about herself. "I feel like you know every last detail about us by now. There must be so much more that we don't know about you. Please? Anything." He pretended to get down on his knees and beg. Betsy laughed.

"There's not much to tell. I was one of the oldest girls at the orphanage, so I've always been around children that were younger than me. I do like to help children."

"You're wonderful with them. The children really adore you."

"They're sweet kids. They really are good, you know?" Betsy truly believed that. She wanted to make sure Charles did, too.

"I do. I know they can be a handful, but deep down, they are good on the inside. I need to remember that I was that way when I was a kid, too." Charles seemed completely reasonable. This was a very different story than how he had reacted when the vase was broken.

Betsy nodded. "Yes. I agree."

"As much as we love having you around..."

Betsy's heart froze. "What?"

"I feel bad, because it means I've stolen you away from all the gentlemen who are trying to call on you."

Betsy almost snorted. "There are no gentlemen, trust me." There was only one gentleman on her mind—and he was walking right next to her.

"There must be. You're beautiful, kind, and caring. Any man would be a fool not to want you."

"Thanks. That's kind, but not true." Betsy was getting nervous about his line of questioning. Was Charles trying to hint that she should spend more time away from the Brooks family? Maybe he thought he had everything under control, and she should get on with her life. The thought made her very sad.

Charles stopped suddenly. They were still near the main street, not anywhere close to her house. Betsy turned to face him.

"Are you all right?" She worried he had fallen ill.

"I'm okay, but I have something to tell you."

Betsy braced herself. Usually, those words led to something bad.

"Betsy—I'm falling in love with you."

Betsy gulped. That was not what she had been expecting. Charles Brooks was in love with her? She had no idea how to respond.

"I think about you day and night, Betsy. You're the one for me, I'm sure of it."

Betsy had dreamed of hearing these words, but now that it was actually happening, she felt lost. She whispered back to him. "I think of you all the time, too."

Charles tipped her head up by the chin and leaned down to kiss her softly. Betsy almost pulled back—she'd never kissed anyone before, and had no idea what to do. But she relaxed and let Charles guide her. He pulled her in close to his chest and wrapped his strong hands around her waist. He kissed her some more, and she let him. She felt the same warm, happy feeling she'd experienced at dinner, but it was much more intense now.

When they stopped kissing, Betsy took a deep breath. She felt like she needed to say something before they went any further. "Charles, I can't stop thinking about you, either. But I think we should take it slow. I haven't known you long, and you have young children in your life. I think we need to get to know each other better before we start kissing each other in the streets at night."

When Betsy saw the hurt look on Charles's face, she worried that she'd made a mistake spilling her heart to him, but she also knew it was important to speak her mind. If there was one thing Edna Petunia and Cletus had taught her, it was that.

"If that's what you want, Betsy," Charles's tone was kind, but his shoulders slumped as they began walking again.

Betsy stayed quiet until they reached her house. Charles walked her to her door.

"Have a good evening, Betsy. I'll see you tomorrow," Charles turned to walk away, but the door burst open.

"Betsy Sanders, there you are! You had Edna Petunia worried sick, you know!" Cletus's words pierced the still night air. "Don't stand there sulking, son. Come in and introduce yourself."

Charles looked surprised, but followed Cletus's instructions. Cletus showed him into the formal parlor and took a seat in his usual chair. Edna Petunia flew into the room and threw her arms around Betsy.

"Betsy Sanders! Where in the world have you been?" Betsy winced as Edna Petunia shrieked loudly into her ear. Edna Petunia turned to Charles. "And who are you?"

Charles managed to compose himself quickly. "I'm Charles Brooks, ma'am. Pleasure to meet you."

Edna Petunia sniffed. "I don't know if it's a pleasure that you've kept my daughter out of the house until this indecent hour, young man."

"Please, Edna Petunia, Cletus, it really wasn't Mr. Brooks's fault." Betsy felt she needed to defend Charles. "He asked me to share a meal with the family, since usually I just leave, and I thought it was good for me to stay. For the children." Betsy's words all came out in a jumble. She wasn't used to expressing her opinions out loud. She usually left that to one of her more outspoken sisters, like Gertrude or Sarah Jane.

"The young man can speak for himself, Betsy." Cletus was glaring at Charles, who hadn't even taken a seat yet. Betsy gestured at the sofa to let him know he could sit down, but Charles remained standing.

"Sir, ma'am, you're right. I take full responsibility for keeping Betsy out too late. It was not my intent to worry you in any way. She's been a wonderful help to me and my family. I don't want to cause any trouble with you. In fact, I'm grateful to you for allowing her to work for me."

"Hmph." Edna Petunia snorted, but Betsy could tell she was only acting mad. The real anger had vanished from her face, and she wore a smirk now. Cletus was nodding approvingly. Cletus was impressed by a man who could admit his own faults—he'd said as much to Betsy on more than one occasion.

"I should be going now." Charles looked at Betsy mournfully, and she began to think about the kiss he had given her. She felt her face grow hot and tried to think about something else to take her mind off him. She worried her parents would be able to tell exactly what she was thinking about just by looking at her.

Charles headed for the door, but Cletus stood up and put a hand out to stop him. "One question, son. Since Betsy's of a certain age, and I have fifteen daughters, I have to ask. Are your feelings toward my daughter honorable?"

"Excuse me, sir?" Now it was Charles's turn to look embarrassed. He put his hands in his pockets and stared at the door.

"I need to know that the type of people Betsy is associating with are going to treat her well. And it should go without saying that my girls are the marrying type."

"Of course, sir. I can assure you that Betsy and I are strictly friends. We work together and treat each other cordially. Beyond that, I have no expectations." Charles kept his tone even and steady, but he didn't mean a single word he was saying. Of course he had expectations. He was falling for Betsy. She was everything he'd ever

wanted in a woman...kind, patient, caring, great with children and an amazing cook. But he'd tried to explain how he felt—he'd even kissed her—and she had told him she wanted to take things slow. He assumed that meant that he had crossed a line, and she wanted to keep things professional. Well, if that was what she wanted, that was what he'd do. Betsy had become far too important to his family to try to end their arrangement. Still, it was going to be very hard not to kiss her again.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Cletus patted Charles on the back. "You can get on your way now."

"Thank you, sir." Charles tipped his hat toward Edna Petunia, Betsy, and Cletus. "Good night, ma'am, miss. Good night, sir." Betsy followed him to the door and watched as he set out for his house. She closed the door and found Edna Petunia staring at her.

"Charles told us his intentions toward you. But what are your intentions toward him?" Edna Petunia giggled. Cletus came over to the two women.

"I don't want to know what you girls are cackling about. It's time for me to go to bed, though. Good night, my love." Cletus kissed Edna Petunia noisily for a few seconds, even though Betsy was standing right next to them. She tried to look away, but she was wedged in.

"I should get to bed, too." Betsy tried to interject, but Cletus and Edna Petunia didn't seem to hear her. She turned toward the stairway and crept up them quietly, hoping not to wake any of her sisters. As she walked to her bedroom, she heard the sound of something knocking over downstairs, and peals of laughter ringing through the entry hall. Edna Petunia and Cletus—those two were quite the pair.

Betsy tried to put the kiss out of her head while she worked at the auction house, but it was impossible. She couldn't forget it, or the way it had made her feel. But Charles had stopped talking to her at the auction house during the work day. Even Mr. Fitzsimmons had picked up on it and asked if there was some type of trouble between the two of them. Charles had sputtered something and looked embarrassed, but Mr. Fitzsimmons had already found something else to grumble about and didn't mention it again.

After Mr. Fitzsimmons had gone for the day, Charles did not offer to show her anything from the auction floor. He'd made it a point to do it every day prior, and it had become a special tradition for them. She'd started to learn what Charles liked and did not like, and he even started sharing with her all the little things that indicated one item was more valuable than another.

For example, some of the furniture had special carvings that told Charles exactly who had made it and when. With the jewelry, he had a special eye piece he wore to ascertain the value of the gem. For artwork, it was a little harder for Charles to explain, but he always seemed to know which ones were special. Betsy's favorite item was still the teapot from the very first day, but that was long gone. Charles had told her someone bought it the very next day.

But that day, instead of inviting her onto the auction floor, Charles was silent as he counted the money and prepared a deposit slip for the bank. Betsy considered asking him if something was wrong, but she felt nervous and unsure. It was not a day she was scheduled to work at the Brooks' house, and she was done with her tasks before he had finished his work at the desk. She approached him shyly.

"I'm done for the day and think I'll head on home. Do you mind if you lock up on your own? If you need my help, I can stay."

Charles looked startled, as if he'd forgotten she were there. "Oh. Yes, I can lock up on my own. Good evening."

Betsy nodded and gathered her things. "Good night." She was practically whispering as she exited the auction house building. When she got outside, she wondered why Charles was being so cold to her. She knew it had something to do with her asking him to take it slow, but she didn't understand why that had upset him so badly. He seemed like a respectful young man, so surely he could understand why a girl like her needed to not rush into things.

Thinking about it made Betsy feel bothered and cross, so instead of going home, she decided to go to see Ruby at the mercantile.

When she arrived, she saw Ruby through the window, sweeping the shop. Her children—three boys and four girls in all—played outside the store.

"Hi, Aunt Betsy!" Jasper called when he saw her.

Betsy waved to the children. "Hello!" She walked inside and took a seat at one of the tables. "I need some advice!"

Ruby looked surprised. "What's wrong, Betsy? Are you okay?" She stopped sweeping and took a seat next to the younger girl.

Betsy nodded. "I have feelings for a man, but I don't know what to do about them."

Ruby stared at her. "Betsy Sanders! I did not expect to hear that come out of your mouth! Who's the lucky man?"

"That's part of the problem. He's a man I work with at the auction house – and I also work for him at the house, caring for his four siblings. They're all orphans, just like we were." It felt good to spill her secret to Ruby. She had been keeping her feelings private for a long time, and it was nice to let it out. Edna Petunia had told the girls that they could always tell her anything, but there were some things one just didn't want to tell their mother about.

"Oh, wow. That sounds complicated." Ruby was sympathetic and put a hand on Betsy's shoulder.

"There's more." Betsy looked at Ruby guiltily.

Ruby frowned. "Uh-oh. What does that mean?"

"Well, he walked me home last night. And he kissed me."

Ruby's eyes widened. She looked around the store, making sure no one else was near enough to hear their conversation. The store was empty except for the two of them. "Kissing is all right unless you let him go any further. Oh, Betsy, you didn't, did you?"

"No, nothing like that. Don't worry. But I do find myself thinking about that kiss...all the time. I can't stop thinking about it." Betsy confided.

"I think that's perfectly normal, if you truly love this man. When Lewis was courting me, I certainly thought about him all the time. It sounds like things just started, though, so you want to be sure."

Betsy nodded. "That makes sense. I told him I wanted to take things slow. And now he's stopped talking to me."

Ruby's face hardened. "He stopped talking to you entirely? Why, that good-for-nothing..."

Betsy put up a hand. "No! No, Ruby, you've got it wrong. I didn't say that right. He's still talking to me, but it's all formal and professional now. It's nothing like how we were yesterday, when he walked me home."

"He walked you home? Good Lord, Betsy. That might be why he's being strange around you. If he's met Edna Petunia and Cletus, who knows what he thinks?" Ruby loved her adoptive parents, but they were very eccentric and had even been known to scare a few potential suitors off.

Betsy laughed. "No, it's not that. At least I don't think it is. I think his feelings are hurt that I asked him to take things slow."

"If you want my advice, you did exactly the right thing, Betsy. If you and Charles are the right couple, it will all work out, even if you take things slowly. And if you are not meant to be, I'm sure you'll meet someone else who is the right man for you."

"Thank you, Ruby." Betsy appreciated that her sister was trying to help her, but she didn't want to think about the possibility Charles was not the only one for her. "I should get home now. Edna Petunia and Cletus have been worried about me ever since I took on this extra work."

"They're getting nervous with all of us married girls out of the house now – they don't want to lose you, too!" Ruby grinned. "It wasn't the same when I got married—I had only lived with them for a short time before I met and married Lewis. But you've been living with them so long they probably forgot what it was like without you."

"That's true. I wonder what would happen if all of us got married and left. They'd be all alone again." It was hard for Betsy to picture Edna Petunia and Cletus living in that large, beautiful house by themselves. She thought they might get lonely. Then again, they seemed to enjoy their alone time.

"I don't know about that. For that to happen, a man would have to propose to Gertie. I don't see any suitors knocking down her door." Ruby laughed at the thought.

Betsy frowned. "That's not very nice, Ruby. Gertie is difficult, I know. But she deserves to find love just as much as the rest of us do."

Ruby stopped chuckling. She felt bad. She had forgotten how goodhearted and sensitive Betsy could be. "You're right. I'll stop making fun of her. It's not kind."

"It's okay. I think I'm just emotional right now because of Charles." Suddenly, Betsy was exhausted thinking about all the feelings she'd experienced within the past two days. There was joy and elation, and the hope of something more when Charles had kissed her. There was nervousness and disappointment when she had asked him to take things slow. There was fear when Cletus had interrogated him. And now, there was sadness and sorrow that Charles seemed to be pulling away from her.

"It will be all right, Betsy. I know it." Ruby patted Betsy's back. Betsy smiled gratefully at her older sister. It was wonderful to have so many sisters who were willing to listen and help her with her problems.

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THE NEXT DAY, Charles did not show up for work at the auction house. Mr. Fitzsimmons complained the entire morning about Charles's irresponsibility, even though the man had never once arrived late or missed work before. Betsy found herself worrying about Charles throughout the morning. Mr. Fitzsimmons kept pointing out spots she had missed as she polished silverware for an upcoming auction.

At lunch, she couldn't wait any longer. She told Mr. Fitzsimmons she needed to go home over her lunch hour and would make up the time that evening. Mr. Fitzsimmons grumbled and told her to hurry back.

Betsy rushed as quickly as she could down the familiar route to the Brooks' family house. When she got there, she saw Matthew, Samuel, and David sitting on the porch steps. She realized she had never seen David so quiet or still before. He looked as if he'd been crying. Matthew and Samuel looked angry.

Betsy was out of breath. "I came to check on Charles because he didn't show up for work today. Is he inside?"

Matthew nodded. "He's in there, but you shouldn't go into the house."

"Charles said we're not allowed in there. It's not fair!" Samuel pouted.

"What? What happened?" Betsy didn't want to overstep if this was part of one of Charles's rules or consequences for the children. But something was clearly wrong.

"Amy's sick. Real sick." With that, David started to cry again.

"Stop crying!" Matthew yelled as he stood up and found a small stone near the garden. Frustrated, he cast it off into the distance.

Betsy took a deep breath. "Do you know what's wrong with Amy?"

Samuel shook his head.

Betsy stared at the house, thinking she might be able to see Charles or Amy through the window. "I know Charles said you're not allowed in there—that's because he cares about you and doesn't want you to get sick like Amy. But I'm an adult, and I'm going to go help Charles take care of her."

Betsy was worried that the boys would protest, but they didn't. She walked past them and pushed the front door open. She called out softly, in case Amy was sleeping. "Charles, it's Betsy."

Betsy didn't hear a response right away, but she did hear footsteps, creaks in the floorboards, and a door being drawn shut. She walked toward the kitchen and found Charles there.

"Shh...she's finally asleep." Charles motioned for Betsy to sit down at the kitchen table. "What are you doing here? It's not even one o'clock." Charles looked sad and scared. Betsy longed to reach out and touch his hand, but she didn't dare.

"I was worried when you didn't show up for work today, so I convinced Mr. Fitzsimmons to let me come here on my lunch break." Betsy didn't mention the part about how she couldn't stop thinking about him.

Charles forced a smile. "You got Fitzsimmons to let you escape for lunch. That's impressive."

"What's wrong with Amy?"

Charles's voice faltered as he tried to explain. "She's so small, Betsy. So small and frail. She has a bad fever and hasn't been able to eat anything since yesterday morning."

"Has Dr. Harvey stopped by?" Dr. Iris Harvey had seen many of the Sanders girls through various ailments and sicknesses since they had moved to Nowhere. Edna Petunia had worked for Iris, and they were quite fond of one another. Iris was the town doctor and never turned away a sick patient.

"No, she hasn't." Charles's face grew dark.

"What's wrong?" Betsy wondered if Charles didn't care for Dr. Harvey for some reason.

Charles looked around nervously. "The last time Dr. Harvey was in this house was when my parents had their accident. They passed shortly after. I don't want her to scare them."

Betsy couldn't help herself—she wrapped her arms around Charles. He leaned his head down on her shoulder. Despite the circumstances, Betsy felt her pulse quicken. They stayed that way until they heard a wail from the bedroom. Charles bolted upright and raced into the small room. Betsy followed him slowly.

Betsy's chest hurt as she saw Amy lying in the bed, crying. Although she had always been small for her size, there was even less of the girl now. She was bundled up in several blankets in the bed in the center of the room.

Charles put his hand to Amy's bright red forehead. "She's still running a fever. It's been nearly an entire day."

Betsy needed to get back to the auction house—Mr. Fitzsimmons would be fuming if she didn't return on time. But she knew Amy needed to be seen by a doctor. Betsy thought about it for a moment, then decided what she had to do. "I'm going to get Dr. Harvey. I'll tell the children that she's coming so they won't be shocked or upset when she arrives."

"But—" Charles began to protest, but Betsy held a hand up.

"I've made up my mind. Amy needs to see a doctor. I'll see you this evening." With that, Betsy rushed out of the cabin and asked Matthew, Samuel, and David to sit with her for a moment. They grudgingly agreed, surrounding her on the creaky porch.

"Your sister is sick – so she needs medicine," Betsy began. "Only doctors can give her the kind of medicine she needs, so I'm going to get Dr. Iris to come here. I believe Dr. Iris has been to your house before, so she'll look familiar. Do you understand?"

The boys nodded. Matthew pretended he didn't care, but Betsy could see the worry in his eyes. David looked like he was going to start crying again.

"Dr. Iris is my doctor, too. It might seem scary that a doctor is coming to your house, but it's just because Amy needs medicine. If she doesn't get medicine, she won't be able to get better. So there's nothing to be scared of. Okay?" Betsy hoped the boys would understand.

"Okay," David jumped to his feet. "Can we play now?" Betsy wanted to laugh despite herself. The little boy was clearly done with conversation.

"You be good and behave yourselves for Charles. I'm going to get Dr. Iris and send her here. I'll be back later." Betsy dusted herself off and prepared for the trip to Dr. Harvey's practice. The doctor's office was close to the house where she lived with her husband and their children, but it wasn't close to the Brooks' house. Betsy rushed off, hoping she wouldn't be too late.

When Betsy finally made it back to the auction house, Mr. Fitzsimmons was leading the day's auctions. It was nearly three o'clock, and she knew he'd be angry when he finished presenting, so she busied herself by cleaning all of the outside windows. She knew Mr. Fitzsimmons felt it was important to keep up the appearance of the exterior of the building, and she hoped it would allow her to keep her position.

Dr. Iris had understood immediately what was wrong as soon as Betsy had described Amy's appearance to her. She had thanked Betsy for coming to get her and promised she would take the family's wagon right away to get to little Amy. She offered Betsy a ride, but Betsy knew she needed to get back to the auction house first and finish her daily chores.

As she cleaned, all she could think about was little Amy. Charles and his family had already been through so much grief and loss. If anything were to happen to the youngest child, it would be devastating.

Once the auction was finished for the day, Mr. Fitzsimmons came to find Betsy. "Where on earth have you been, girl? Both my employees run off on me in one day? Unacceptable!"

"Charles's younger sister is very, very sick. I was late because I went to see her, and then I went to call on Dr. Harvey. I'm very sorry, sir." Betsy steeled herself for whatever consequence was to come.

To her surprise, Mr. Fitzsimmons' face softened. "The little one? I saw her once, at his parents' funeral at the church—just a sweet, tiny little thing. I'm sorry to hear she's taken ill."

Betsy could not believe her ears. She had been sure Mr. Fitzsimmons would tell her she had lost her job on the spot. More than that, he seemed to be displaying kindness and love for another person. She wished Charles had been there to witness it. She knew he would have laughed with her afterward.

Thinking of Charles made Betsy snap back to attention. "I won't let it happen again, sir. Is there anything else you need from me today? I'd like to get back to Charles's house to see if there's anything I can do."

Mr. Fitzsimmons nodded and turned to face the auction hall. "Just a few things, and then you can be on your way. Aisles two, three, and six need dusting, and seven and nine need a polish. Then you can go, and I'll look up. How's that?"

Betsy nodded quickly before Mr. Fitzsimmons could change his mind. "Thank you very much, Mr. Fitzsimmons. I won't forget it." Mr. Fitzsimmons shook his head as if to say it was nothing. Betsy blazed through her chores faster than usual. She called out to Mr. Fitzsimmons as she rushed out the door. "Good evening!" Mr. Fitzsimmons grunted.

Instead of going directly to Charles's house, Betsy knew it was important for her to stop somewhere else first.

When Betsy arrived at the church, it was completely empty. She knew that Micah, her sister Sarah Jane's husband and town pastor, was likely in the parsonage, but this wasn't a social call. She went into one of the pews and took a seat.

Betsy bowed her head and began to pray. Ever since she and her sisters had moved to Texas, the church had always been a safe place that provided comfort and joy. She was glad to have a few moments of peace and quiet after all the rushing around of the afternoon.

When Betsy had finished praying, she left the church and set out for Charles's house. As she walked up to the house, she saw Dr. Harvey getting into her buggy. Dr. Harvey waited for Betsy to get closer.

"How is she?" Betsy could barely catch her breath. Her legs ached and her chest heaved after all the walking across town.

Dr. Harvey frowned. "She still has a very bad fever. There wasn't much I was able to do for her. It's very important that the other children not be near her right now. We don't want them getting sick, too."

"I don't understand. Is she going to be all right?" Betsy tried to understand what Dr. Harvey was telling her.

Dr. Harvey leaned over and placed a hand on Betsy's shoulder. "She's very, very ill, Betsy. You should go home and get some rest. We should know more in the morning. I'll be back with more medicine tomorrow." With that, Dr. Harvey took off toward her own house and her own family.

Betsy was terrified. Amy had to recover...she just had to. And no way was she going to leave Charles all by himself. It sounded silly, but in a way, they all had become a kind of family—Betsy, Charles, and all the children. She would not abandon them in their time of need.

David was sleeping in the corner of the porch, exhausted by the past few days' events. Matthew was dragging a stick through the dirt right next to the porch, and Samuel was reading a book.

Betsy sat down and put an arm around Samuel. "That's great that you're doing your reading, Samuel. I'm sure Charles will be very happy."

"Charles doesn't care about us." Matthew stopped dragging the stick and changed directions. "He just cares about Amy."

"That's because she's sick, Matthew. I'm sure in a few days, when this is all behind us, things will go back to normal." Betsy wasn't sure if that would happen, but she hoped it would.

"Normal is no good, either. Charles is so mean to us. We have to do school work all the time. We can never play or do anything fun!" Matthew was practically shouting.

Betsy worried that Charles would be able to hear. She stood up and walked over to the boy. "That's because he loves you and wants what's best for you. I know it." Betsy gave Matthew a hug. He surprised her—and himself—by hugging her back. *The poor dear, Betsy thought. He must miss his mother so much.*

"All right. I need to go in and check on Amy and Charles. I'll be back outside later. Have you eaten yet?" Betsy thought the boys looked a bit ragged. Matthew shook his head.

Betsy went into the house to look for Charles. She found him standing at the kitchen sink, half-asleep. She went up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Charles jumped, startled. Betsy was in front of him—or was he just dreaming that? No, it was actually Betsy. She looked beautiful, standing in his kitchen with a concerned look on her face. He noticed himself wishing they were anywhere but where they were.

"Have you slept at all?" Betsy noticed a piece of hair had fallen across Charles's forehead, and she brushed it back out of his face. She felt a ripple of desire course through her body.

"No. Amy needs me. I should get back in there. I was just getting fresh water." Charles held up the glass he held in his hands. He filled it at the sink and started walking toward the bedroom. Then he turned around, as if just remembering that Betsy was still there. "Betsy, what are you doing here?"

"I couldn't stay away. I wanted to find out how Amy was doing...and you need help, Charles. The boys need to eat. I'll make them dinner." Betsy had never talked or taken charge so much in her entire life as she had over the past few weeks. She was finding out that sometimes, she likes to take charge. Especially when she knew the right thing to do.

Charles couldn't fight back. He didn't have the energy, and she had a good point. He took the glass into the bedroom.

Betsy found some salt pork in the pantry and began to fry it. She also found a few potatoes that would probably go bad soon, so she chopped them as she boiled a pot of water. A little while later, she put a small portion of salt pork and potatoes onto three plates and took them outside to the boys.

David still looked very sleepy, but he perked up immediately at the sight of food. The three boys ate hastily and hungrily. Betsy knew they were worried about their sister. She also didn't know where they would sleep that evening. There wasn't enough space in the front room for all three boys and Charles. But they couldn't go into the bedroom with Amy, or they'd be at risk to catch what she had.

As Betsy was wondering what to do, she saw a buggy in the distance. As it got closer, she realized it was Cletus.

"What are you doing here?" Betsy was so relieved to see a familiar face.

Cletus stopped and put the horses up. "When Edna Petunia heard about the young girl falling sick, she forced me to come over here with pie. She baked three kinds...there's cherry, apple, and rhubarb." Cletus pulled three dishes out of the buggy. Betsy giggled. No matter the occasion, Edna Petunia baked.

"And who are you?" Cletus walked up to little David. David stared up at the older man.

David sid over, hiding behind Betsy.

"Oh, now you're going to be bashful?" Betsy ruffled her hands through David's hair. "Go ahead, introduce yourself. This is my father, Cletus Sanders."

"I'm David," David spoke after a few moments spent staring at Cletus.

Cletus grinned and stuck his hand out. "Pleased to meet you, David. Now, I don't suppose you like marbles...do you?" Cletus reached into his pocket and held out a handful of marbles.

David's eyes widened and he looked at Betsy. Betsy smiled at him. He grabbed the marbles from Cletus's hand and began to examine each and every one.

"What do you say, dear?" Betsy reminded him.

David looked confused for a second, but then grinned. "Thank you, Mr. Cletus!" David showed Samuel his new marbles, and even Matthew came over to look at them.

Cletus pulled Betsy aside. "Do these boys have a place to stay tonight?"

"I don't know. Charles is in there with Amy, and he hasn't slept yet. I'm worried that he needs more help. And the boys aren't going to fit into one room. It's a small house." Betsy pressed her lips together. It was getting late. They were going to have to figure something out.

"All right, it's settled then. Boys!" Cletus called.

Betsy was confused. "What's settled?"

"The boys looked up as Cletus called them. 'How would you like to go for a ride? I might even let you drive if you behave yourselves!'"

Betsy stared at Cletus, horrified.

"Only joking!" Cletus tipped his hat. "Edna Petunia asked me if the boys had a place to stay tonight. She thought it'd be best if they were out of their older brother's hair. This way they won't catch whatever the little one's got. We have plenty of room at our house."

Betsy was touched. It was so kind of Edna Petunia and Cletus to open their home to the boys, even though they barely knew them. "I should make sure Charles knows about this." She didn't want him to worry about the boys. He had enough on his mind.

Betsy walked back into the house and found Charles at Amy's bedside. The poor girl was still sleeping. Charles had one hand resting on her forehead. He looked up when Betsy came into the room.

"Thank you for everything," Charles looked up at Betsy. It was amazing how much she had done for him and his family in such a short amount of time. He could hardly remember how anything had been before Betsy. It seemed like she had always been around.

"Of course. The boys are getting tired, and Cletus is here. He brought some pies from Edna Petunia, and he's offering to take them to our house. We have plenty of space, and it will be safer for the boys to stay away until Amy recovers." Betsy peeked at Amy. She looked so frail and sick.



Charles nodded. "That's so nice of them. I can't accept that..."

"Yes, you can. It's what's right for the children." Betsy put her hands on her hips.

Charles laughed softly, not wanting to wake Amy. "Betsy Sanders, did you know you're beautiful when you're being bossy?"

Betsy could feel her cheeks and ears going red. She knew Charles didn't mean anything by it—he had to be very tired—but it still made her feel wonderful to hear him say she was beautiful.

Charles nodded. "Fine, then. The boys can stay at the Sanders' house. Please tell Cletus I said thank you very much."

"I will." Betsy closed the bedroom door gently and went back outside. "Cletus, Charles said you can take the boys. Boys, please come here for a second." Betsy ran her hand over David's hair, smoothing it. "Cletus is going to take you to my house. There are beds and blankets for you there, and toothbrushes and food and anything else you may need. But it's very important that you listen carefully to Cletus and his wife, Edna Petunia. You must follow all their rules and listen to them. Do you understand?"

Cletus looked amused, but the boys listened dutifully. When Betsy had finished talking, Matthew was first to speak up. "Yes, we understand, Betsy."

Betsy hugged each of the boys and then watched as they got into the buggy with Cletus. "Good night!" Betsy called after the wagon.

When the buggy had disappeared into the distance, Betsy went back inside the house. She cleaned the dishes that were in the sink and tidied the kitchen and front room. Next, she went back into the bedroom, tiptoeing in case Amy was still sleeping.

Charles looked terrible. He was sitting in a chair next to the bed, leaning over Amy, and his eyes were bloodshot. His hair was stringy, and he kept nodding off and jerking back awake.

"Charles. You need to sleep. I'll watch Amy." Betsy's tone was kind, but firm.

"I can't allow you to do that. You should go home." Charles protested, but he seemed too exhausted to care. Betsy helped him to his feet and walked him out to the front room. In a few moments, he was lying in his usual spot on the floor, fast asleep. Betsy quietly crept back into the bedroom.

She held a cool rag to Amy's forehead. The girl was still burning up. She wished she could do something—anything—to help Amy.

Betsy was exhausted, but she passed the hours away by thinking of the one positive thought she could imagine—Charles. She felt guilty for thinking about him in a romantic way while his sister was fighting for her life. She squeezed the girl's hand and prayed.

\* \* \*

IN THE MORNING, Charles found Betsy fast asleep, still sitting in the chair next to Amy. Charles felt Amy's forehead and grabbed Betsy's shoulder to wake her up.

"Betsy!" Charles cried out. "Amy's fever broke!"

Betsy woke up with a start. It had been a long night, and she wasn't sure where she was. As she got her bearings, she realized what Charles had said.

"Oh my goodness! I'm so happy!" Betsy's eyes began to well up.

Charles was so thrilled he bent over, tipped Betsy backwards, and gave her the biggest, longest kiss she could have ever imagined.

Amy rubbed her eyes. "Charles, why are you kissing Betsy? You said I'm not allowed to kiss boys."

Charles and Betsy both burst out laughing.

"We're both very happy that you're all right, Amy. You were very sick, but you're getting better now, and we're both going to be here to take care of you." Charles helped Amy sit up a bit in bed.

"I'll go get you some more water." Charles took the glass from the bedside table and took it into the kitchen.

Betsy thought about what was still in the pantry. "I can make some eggs for you if you'd like. I bet you're hungry!"

Amy thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, I want eggs! Thank you, Betsy."

As Betsy turned to leave the room, Amy called out to her again.

"Betsy? You said you're not my new Mama, you're just my friend. But you stayed in my room and held my hand and sang me songs, just like a Mama would do. So even if you don't think you're my Mama, I think you are." Amy smiled sweetly.

Betsy nearly broke down sobbing. She loved this little girl with all her heart. There was part of her—maybe even a big part of her—that desperately wanted to be Amy's mama. But it was much more complicated than that. The poor girl had been through enough, and Betsy didn't want to confuse her. Still, she didn't have the heart to disagree. So she nodded and smiled, then went into the kitchen to make fried eggs.

Charles was still standing at the kitchen sink.

"Are you all right?" Betsy wasn't sure what he was doing.

Charles took a deep breath. "I was just thinking, Betsy."

"What?"

"I've never seen another woman be so loving and tender to my brothers and sister like you have. It's nothing short of miraculous. It feels like God placed you here in Nowhere just so you could meet us and take care of us..." Charles trailed off.

Betsy nodded her understanding, but in truth, she didn't understand what Charles was trying to say.

"I'm sorry, I'm babbling. I should get back to Amy." Charles started to go back into the bedroom. "Oh, and Betsy?"

"Yes?"

"You should go back home and get some rest. I'll take care of everything from here. Thank you again for all that you've done."

Betsy sighed, feeling glum. She had felt something when Charles had been talking about her helping out with the children. She had hoped he might say something about a possible future together. But then he had stopped and seemed very business-like, telling her to go home.

Instead of going home right away, Betsy decided to make the eggs so Charles and Amy could at least have breakfast. She had just put the food on the table when she saw Cletus's buggy pull up outside.

Betsy ran out to meet Cletus and the children.

"I have wonderful news, boys! Amy is feeling much better!" Betsy could hardly contain her joy. She forgot about Charles's strange behavior and allowed herself to be fully happy with the boys. As they climbed out of the wagon, they started jumping up and down in excitement.

"Okay, boys. There are fried eggs on the table. I'm going home with Cletus now, because I need to get some rest." Betsy hugged each of the boys and sent them into the house. She climbed into the buggy with Cletus.

"Cletus, I love you and you saved the day yesterday and today. But right now, I really need to sleep." With that, Betsy promptly fell asleep as Cletus flicked the reins. He chuckled as they set off into the distance.

Betsy hummed to herself as she peeled potatoes in the Brooks' house. It had been three weeks since Amy's illness and recovery, and things had finally returned to normal. Betsy still came three days a week to help with cooking and cleaning. Charles was back to work at the auction house, and he had even started showing her the most interesting items again.

The boys were still rambunctious, of course...but that was to be expected, Betsy thought. Charles had a different opinion. He had come across a book at the auction house that said children were best behaved when they had proper exercise. Each night before dinner, Charles led everyone in nightly stretches and sports while Betsy prepared dinner. She secretly thought it was rather silly, but didn't have the heart to tell Charles that.

That evening, the children were outside doing their calisthenics. Charles, who had been reading a book in the front room, stood up and walked into the kitchen. He set the book down and slid his arms around Betsy's waist. He buried his head into her hair.

Betsy set down the potato she was peeling. Her neck stiffened as she felt Charles's warm breath against it. He held onto her tightly and began to kiss her neck. She turned around to face him. She was barely in control of her own body. He found her lips with his own and began to kiss her passionately.

Betsy struggled to catch her breath. "Can you...wait...just a second?" Charles stopped, his eyes full of concern. "What's wrong? Didn't you like that?"

Betsy exhaled. "No, of course I did. It's just that—I don't really know what I'm doing, and I'm...nervous and scared."

Charles smiled at her. "I don't ever want to pressure you into anything, Betsy. You know that. It's okay to be nervous and scared. But I hope that you'll be comfortable with me kissing you. Because it's one of my favorite things to do."

Betsy loved hearing this. "I think kissing would be all right." She was sure she was probably blushing, but she knew she needed to get over that. She was an adult now, and she needed to be able to do and say things without getting so embarrassed about them.

"Well, that's a relief!" Charles bent down and tugged at her bottom lip with his teeth. His tongue gently explored Betsy's mouth, pushing and pulling. Betsy kissed back, shyly at first, then slightly more confidently as they went along.

"What's for dinner?" Matthew shouted as he came running into the house. "We're all done!"

Charles and Betsy pulled apart, laughing.

"What's so funny?" Matthew demanded.

"Nothing," Charles and Betsy spoke at the same time, then burst out laughing again.

Matthew went outside to get the rest of his siblings for dinner. "Adults are strange."

Betsy's heart felt like it might explode inside her chest. She didn't understand how her married sisters were able to contain themselves. If this was what love felt like, she didn't know how long she could even last. It was exhilarating and it was exhausting. And it also felt very, very good.

The rest of the children came in for dinner and gathered around the table. Betsy had begun staying for dinner once or twice a week, and she had come to cherish the times when the entire family was all in one place. She had started thinking of the children as her own. She knew that wasn't completely true, but in a way, she was the only mother they had right now.

"Thank you, God, for this delicious meal, and for gathering our family here together. We thank you." Charles always started the meal with a prayer, which Betsy loved. She thought it was very important and found it deeply satisfying that Charles did, too. "Thank you, Betsy, for this delicious dinner." Charles also liked to model polite behavior for the children.

Betsy smiled. "You're welcome, Charles."

"Thank you, Betsy, for spending all night with me and helping me heal." Amy piped up.

Betsy stood up, walked over to her, and gave her a hug. "Of course, Amy. I'm so glad you are doing so much better." She took her seat again and they all began eating.

"I brought home something today you all might be interested in," Charles announced, eyes gleaming. The boys and Amy perked up. "It's a piece of an old ship from the sixteenth century, and it was being auctioned off. There were a few pieces that aren't valuable and can't be sold, so Mr. Fitzsimmons let me bring it home."

"I want to see it!" David shouted, jumping up from the table, but Charles held out a hand.

"Not until after dinner, David."

Dejectedly, David sat down in his seat. Everyone was quiet as they enjoyed their roast and potatoes.

"This is delicious, Ma—I mean, Betsy!" Amy declared. She had begun calling Betsy "Mama" when no one else was around, but sometimes she slipped a little.

"Thank you, Amy. I'm glad you like it."

Matthew set down his fork and looked at Charles, his face full of nerves. "My friend Robbie from down the road asked me to help out him and his Pa tomorrow. They have a new automobile and they're driving into the city to pick up supplies for their business. Can I please have permission to go?"

Charles frowned. "I don't know. You have your studies. And I don't know Robbie or his father. I don't like the idea of you going off with them."

Betsy fought back a small smile. Charles was sounding a lot like Cleitus with his overprotectiveness. She didn't see the harm in letting Matthew spend time with his friend. It even sounded like a learning opportunity, since they were going into Austin and he'd see all the sights and sounds of the city. But she respected Charles's opinion and knew that whatever he said was the final rule.

"You don't know Robbie's father? Don't you see him at church?" Matthew was dismayed at his brother's excuse. There was always a reason why Matthew wasn't allowed to do something. He just wanted to be allowed to do something—*anything*—for a change.

Charles's brow furrowed. "Hmm — is he the one with the red hair? Or the bald one?"

"Neither!" Matthew screamed. "You never pay attention to anything anymore! You're not our father, you can't tell us what you do!" Matthew raced out of the house and slammed the door shut.

Charles looked more shocked than angry. "Please excuse my brother's temper."

"Should I go after him?" Betsy asked quietly.

"No. Don't worry about him. He'll be back. Now, who wants to see a piece of an old ship?"

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AN HOUR LATER, Betsy was preparing to go back to her home, but Matthew still wasn't back yet. She looked out the window and saw thick, foreboding storm clouds rolling in.

Charles was worried. He paced the house, looking up at the clock every few moments. "I'm going out there to find him. Can you stay with the children?"

Betsy nodded. Of course, she would. Edna Petunia and Cleitus still gave her a hard time about how much time she was spending at the Brooks' house, but she thought they would understand in this case. After all, they had opened their hearts to Betsy and her sisters just as Betsy had opened hers to Matthew, Samuel, David, and Amy.

Charles put on boots and kissed the other children good night in case he came home late. Before he left, he also grabbed Betsy's hand and gave her a quick squeeze.

"Thank you," he whispered in her ear. Betsy shivered.

The children did their lessons and played a few games with each other, but they soon tired and went to bed. Betsy tucked them in, watching through the window as rain poured down on the fields of Nowhere. Betsy went out to the front room and checked the clock. It was getting late. Now she was not only worried about Matthew, but about Charles, too.

She also knew that the later she stayed out, the more upset Edna Petunia and Cleitus would be with Charles. They were reasonable—to a point. But Betsy knew they sometimes faulted Charles with how much he relied on her to help him out. Betsy didn't mind because she cared for him and knew he needed the help. But Edna Petunia and Cleitus didn't know the magnitude of her feelings for him...and she certainly wasn't about to share that information.

Betsy sighed and decided it might be nice to take a nap. She settled down on the floor in Charles's usual spot, thinking about his big, strong shoulders and firm hands, and wishing he was there with her.

Betsy had just drifted off when she heard the door burst open.

"Has he come back yet?" Charles was a mess — dripping wet from head to toe. Betsy found a blanket and rushed over to him, helping him dry off.

"I'm sorry. He hasn't been here. Did you see him at all?" Betsy had been sure Charles would have found Matthew by now. Where could the boy be?

Charles let out a sharp, frustrated breath. "I'll bet he's doing this on purpose. I bet he's hiding so we'll worry about him. I could have caught a cold out there. Who knows, I probably did." Charles was fuming in the way Mr. Fitzsimmons usually did.

"Where did you look?" Betsy thought maybe some questions could calm Charles down.

"I went to his friend Robbie's house, stopped by the church, went to the school, the mercantile—he's nowhere to be found."

"Well, he's got to be somewhere."

"I know, you're right, Betsy. But I have no idea where to look next. What are we going to do?"

"Are there any other places he likes to go to?"

"Not that I can think of."

Betsy tried to put herself in Matthew's shoes. If she was his age, where would she want to go to hide? "You don't think he'd go to the auction house, do you?"

Charles shook his head. "I don't think so. He never showed any interest in it before."

"Okay. Was there anything Matthew said over the past few days that could give us a clue into what he was thinking?"

"All he kept saying was he wanted to be alone. I don't know what that means!" Charles couldn't believe how angry he was. Matthew had no idea how much trouble he was causing. He could get sick, or hurt—there was no telling what kind of trouble he could run into on his own. The only thing that gave Charles any type of comfort was that Betsy was there. He didn't know what he'd do without her.

Betsy glanced at the clock. It was nearly one in the morning. She was going to be in a world of trouble when she finally returned to the Sanders house, but that wasn't her main concern. "I think we should go to bed, Charles. You need some rest, and we'll need to make breakfast for the other children in the morning. We can start searching again before work."

Charles started to protest. "But we can't—"

"I know you think that's abandoning Matthew. But you have to stay strong for the other children." Betsy knew she was right, even though it was very difficult to say out loud. She was just as worried as Charles was about the boy.

"Fine. Where will you stay? I don't want to suffer the wrath of Edna Petunia." Charles looked so concerned about the possibility that Betsy almost burst into laughter.

Betsy waved a hand. "I'll deal with Edna Petunia. You get some rest."

"I wouldn't feel right unless I made sure you were comfortable first. Why don't you take Matthew's bed?" Charles pointed toward the bedroom.

Betsy thought about it. It felt strange to take the missing boy's bed. At the same time, it was the best option available. So she nodded. Charles gently opened the door and led her inside. He made sure she had enough blankets and a pillow.

"Good night." Charles whispered softly into Betsy's ear. Betsy felt a shudder run throughout her entire body as she watched him walk away. The power the man had over her was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

Before Betsy drifted off, she prayed. *Dear God, I know I've asked you for a lot lately. Thank you for healing Amy. Please let Matthew be okay, too.* She hoped she wasn't asking too much.

The following morning was a blur. Betsy was the first to rise. She fried eggs in a skillet for breakfast and wrote out a list of possible places to look for Matthew.

Charles woke a little after Betsy. He came into the kitchen and sighed. "Thank you for doing all this, Betsy."

Betsy nodded. She felt she was simply doing what was needed.

Charles scarfed his food down and looked out the window. The sun was shining and the skies were clear. If he was going to find Matthew, he had as good a chance as any on a day like today. "I'm going to keep looking for him. I'll see you at the auction house."

Betsy watched Charles walk out the door. She wanted so badly to hold his hand or kiss him goodbye, but she knew it wasn't appropriate. She needed to put her fantasies out of her mind. She was his help and that was all. She wasn't truly a part of his family, no matter how much she felt like it.

The children woke up at half past six. Amy came into the kitchen first.

"Betsy, what are you doing here? I thought you weren't allowed to stay all night except for when I was sick." Amy rubbed her eyes.

"That's right, Amy. But last night, I decided to stay because Charles was up late looking for Matthew."

"Is Matthew back?" Amy's eager expression made Betsy want to fall over.

Betsy walked over to Amy and gave her a reassuring hug. "Not yet, Amy. Charles is going to find him, though."

"Do you think Matthew is going to go where our Mama and Papa went? Because they can't come back, not to Earth. They live in a place called Heaven."

Betsy felt tears welling up in her eyes. This sweet child had suffered so much in her short life. She felt the need to protect her from any further damage. "Charles is doing everything he can to make sure Matthew comes home soon."

David ran into the kitchen next. Betsy thought sometimes that the boy moved as if he had a motor inside him. A sleepy Samuel followed a few minutes later.

"Where's Matthew?" David demanded as he ate his breakfast quickly.

"Charles is looking for him. He asked me to make sure you all ate a good breakfast. But I need to leave soon, too. Samuel, you're in charge. Make sure David and Amy do their lessons—and you have to do yours, too."

Samuel looked surprised but also excited. "Yes, Betsy."

"Okay, children. I'm going now. I'll be back later to check on you. Be good." Betsy gave each child a hug before she left for the day. It was so hard not to become attached after spending so much time with the family. She didn't know what it was like to have children, but she imagined this was something close. She constantly thought about them and worried about them and wanted to make sure they had everything they needed.

For the moment, though, she knew she had to focus on Matthew. She was most worried that he'd gone into a neighboring town—or even set out for Austin, the nearest city. Betsy had only an hour until she was due at work. She decided to limit her search to the few blocks around the auction house. That way, she could be thorough. After work, she would expand her search zone. Although the weather was hot and dry, Betsy shivered as she imagined Matthew still being lost when she got home from work. She hated to think of him being missing for that length of time. All sorts of danger could befall a boy of his age in that span. Plus, she didn't know what he would eat or drink. He might fall sick, or even pass out without nourishment.

Betsy bit her lip as the auction house came into view. Behind the auction house was a street lined with small, older homes. At the very end of the block were a few that had been abandoned for years. Betsy remembered something Charles had said to her, that Matthew wanted to be alone. Where better to be alone than in an abandoned house?

Betsy hurried to the end of the block. When she came to the first house that had been abandoned, she cautiously walked onto the porch and peered through the window. She couldn't see anyone or anything. She tried the doorknob, and the door swung open. Cobwebs crept across each wall, and dust and rubble covered the entire floor. Betsy took a deep breath and forced herself further into the home.

There were only two rooms in the house, and Matthew wasn't in either of them. Betsy left the house and took a deep breath of the clean, fresh air.

Betsy closed the door carefully behind her and went to the next house in the line. There were four abandoned houses in all, and she was determined to check each and every one.

By the time she forced herself to enter the fourth house, Betsy was coughing from all the dust. She also felt exhausted and worried that Mr. Fitzsimmons would fire her if she wasn't at her best. But she knew she couldn't stop. There was a loud creaking sound as she stepped across the threshold.

"Matthew!" Betsy called out, but there was no answer.

Suddenly, another floorboard creaked...but Betsy had stopped moving. She froze.

In this house, there were two rooms. The creaking had to have been coming from the next room. Betsy tiptoed into the next room, careful not to make a sound. She saw the door swing shut—someone had been in the house just a moment ago! Betsy rushed outside and saw Matthew, about to climb a tree.

A wave of relief and gratitude washed over Betsy. She felt happier than she'd felt in her entire life, unless she counted the time Charles had kissed her. She ran up to Matthew and gave him a big hug.

"Matthew! We were all worried sick about you. Are you all right?" Betsy didn't ever want to let go.

Matthew looked as if he wanted to protest, but then he gave in and relaxed as Betsy held him close. "I am so mad at Charles! I couldn't stay there anymore!"

Betsy stepped back and set her hands on Matthew's shoulders. She looked him straight in the eyes. "Matthew, Charles loves you. He only wants what's best for you. When he's strict with you, it's because he thinks that will help you turn into the wonderful young man you are becoming. Do you understand that?"

Matthew hung his head. "I don't know. Why does he have to be so mean to me and the other kids?"

Betsy wasn't sure what to say. This was a more appropriate conversation for Matthew and Charles to have. "I think you should talk to your brother about that. But first, you're going to have to come home."

Matthew nodded his head.

Betsy looked around the house warily. "Have you had anything to eat since last night?"

Matthew shook his head.

"You're to go straight home this instant. I made eggs, and there should be enough left for you to eat. When Charles gets home from work, you two can talk. How's that?" Betsy felt like she was being overly bossy, but she also knew that Matthew was probably too upset to think straight. He needed someone to guide him to do the right thing.

"Yes, Betsy." Matthew looked a little relieved at the prospect of eating one of Betsy's home-cooked meals. He had to be worn out and famished from his evening staying in the dilapidated house. "Betsy, you're the only good thing that's happened to us since our parents died. I hope you are going to be part of our family."

Betsy smiled sadly but didn't say anything. She didn't want to get the boy's hopes up. She watched as Matthew set off on the path toward the Brooks' home. She realized she needed to get to the auction house.

When she arrived, Charles was already there, pacing the floor inside the hall. Mr. Fitzgerald raised his eyebrows as Betsy walked in. He motioned to the clock, and Betsy saw she was exactly on time.

Betsy spotted Charles in the hall and rushed toward him. "I found Matthew!"

"Is he all right? Where?" Charles looked frantic.

"He's fine. I sent him home to eat and get some rest. I found him in one of the old abandoned houses behind the auction house." Betsy hesitated. "Charles, I think you need to talk to him."

"Yes. I'll do that." Charles set his mouth in a grim, tight line.

"And Charles?" Betsy knew Mr. Fitzsimmons was staring at her, but she didn't care.

"Yes?"

"Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help out. I've really grown to care for the children, and I want what's best for them, too." Betsy felt silly telling Charles all this, but she wasn't telling him everything that was in her heart.

Betsy tried to ignore her feelings and threw herself into her work. Mr. Fitzsimmons was pleased when she completed an extra round of dusting before lunch and had time to polish all the doorknobs and brass knockers.

At the end of the day, Charles told Mr. Fitzsimmons he needed to leave early to attend to a family matter. Mr. Fitzsimmons grunted but told him it was fine as long as he made up the hours the following day. Betsy told Mr. Fitzsimmons that she was going outside to sweep up dust from the front entrance. She raced to catch Charles before he left for the day.

"Charles!" she called. "Do you need me to come to the house tonight?"

Charles looked puzzled. "No, Betsy. I'll handle tonight on my own." He turned and began slowly walking away.

Betsy felt like she was going to burst into tears. She had thought Charles might need or want her help. But he didn't want her there at all. No matter how hard she worked or how much she took care of the children, he didn't see things the same way she did. She took a deep breath and began to attack the dust with her broom. If Charles didn't need her help, she would make sure the auction house shined like it never had before.

Betsy worked so hard for the rest of the day that Mr. Fitzsimmons told her that she had done quite enough and should end her shift when he left. Betsy gratefully accepted. She was exhausted.

When Betsy got back to the Sanders house, Theresa and Hattie were sitting by the entrance.

"Edna Putunia and Cletus want to see you in the formal parlor." Theresa told her.

"They're pretty mad!" Hattie's face wore a worried expression.

Betsy smiled. "I'm sure they are."

Betsy went into the informal parlor and sat down. She didn't say a word. Her parents erupted in shouts.

"I can't believe you would be so irresponsible—"

"Word travels fast in this town!"

"I have half a mind to—"

"That darn Charles Brooks—"

"Never expected a girl like you—"

Betsy patiently waited for them to wear themselves out. After a few minutes, they stopped and looked at Betsy, waiting for her to respond.

"I'm sorry. I know what I did was wrong, and it won't happen again. In fact, I'm done working for the Brooks family altogether." With that, Betsy promptly burst into tears.

Edna Petunia and Cletus stared at each other. They hadn't expected this at all. Edna Petunia stood up and walked over to Betsy. She pulled two peppermint sticks from her bosom and handed them to Betsy, wrapping her up in a hug. "There, there. Poor dear."

Edna Petunia and Cletus waited for Betsy to stop sobbing. She cleared her throat, wiped her eyes, and tried to explain. "I've gotten too attached to Charles and his siblings. I feel like I'm their family, but I don't think Charles sees it that way. I don't see how I can keep working for him."

"You did your best and helped that family out in many ways. If your time of serving them is over—well, there's no shame in that," Cletus looked at Betsy. "You know we're proud of you no matter what."

Edna Petunia nodded. "If that boy doesn't have the sense to see that you'd make a darn fine wife, he doesn't deserve to have you keep working for him. And you already have one job. That's plenty."

Betsy pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose. "I'm going to miss the children, though." She grew weepy again.

"That's our sweet Betsy. So thoughtful and caring. One day, you'll have the family you're meant to have. It will all work out. Look at me and Cletus!" Edna Petunia looked at her husband. He kissed her on the nose. "I never thought I'd find love again at my age, but here we are! Happy as clams with a whole house full of bastards!"

Despite her pain, Betsy had to laugh. Hearing Edna Petunia talk about all of her bastards always made her giggle. A few of her sisters didn't like the term, but Betsy had never minded it. It was just one of the many endearing quirks Edna Petunia had.

"So, I'm not in any trouble?" Betsy asked hopefully.

Edna Petunia and Cletus looked at each other once again. "Well, we certainly don't want to encourage this behavior," Cletus's tone was strict. "You know, we would have gone to the Brooks house last night, but Alice took ill. Must have caught something from that Dr. Harvey's office, I reckon. We both stayed up with her half the night and weren't able to leave until the morning."

"At the same time, we feel you're suffering enough," Edna Petunia smiled at Betsy. "While you're living under this roof, though, you have to sleep here at night. That's not negotiable."

Betsy nodded. "Yes, of course. I understand."

"Now, I think you should probably get some rest. By the looks of you, you had a long night." Edna Petunia helped Betsy stand and walked up the stairs with her. She closed the door softly behind her. As Betsy drifted off to sleep, she thought she heard the older woman sigh. "Poor little bastard."

When Betsy woke, it was late evening. Her eyelids sagged as she walked into the informal parlor.

"You're awake!" Hattie shouted.

"You've been sleeping for a very long time!" Theresa piped up.

Katie was singing, Gentie was in the corner reading, and Hattie was braiding Theresa's hair in the corner. Betsy smiled. It was lovely to be home with her sisters. She had missed them. Maybe there was some good that could come out of spending time away from the Brooks family.

"You missed dinner. Are you hungry?" Edna Petunia took a sip from her flask of "cough tonic". The woman carried it with her everywhere! All the girls knew it wasn't really for a cough, but they didn't say anything. A woman her age with a heart as big as Edna Petunia's deserved a vice or two.

Betsy shook her head. "I don't have much of an appetite. I'm just happy to be home."

"Well, we're glad to have you home!" Cletus clapped a hand on Betsy's shoulder. "All my girls in one place—well, the unmarried ones, of course."

Betsy stayed downstairs, listening to her sisters chat as they discussed their plans for the next big family event. The newest child in the family—Penny and Tom's youngest son—was to be baptized at their church in the coming months. Alice and Hattie were helping Edna Petunia bake cakes and pies for the occasion. Penny had been teaching Katie how to sew, and Katie was excited that some of her handiwork would be shown off in the baby's baptism outfit. Betsy looked forward to it, too. She loved it when her church welcomed new members, especially the children.

Too tired to think straight, she excused herself and went back into her bedroom. Before she fell asleep, she thought about Matthew, Samuel, David, and Amy. She hoped that they were having a peaceful evening with Charles and that his temper wasn't getting the best of him. She knew he loved his siblings more than anything, he just wasn't very good at expressing his feelings. *But Charles isn't my problem anymore*, Betsy reminded herself.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Edna Petunia and Cletus were surprised to hear a knock on the door.

"Who could that be, at this hour?" Cletus frowned. He got up to answer the door. "I don't know what you're doing here so late at night, son."

"Who is it?" Katie squealed. Theresa jumped up to see who was at the door.

"I'd like to speak to you and your wife privately," Charles said softly to Cletus. The older man nodded in understanding.

"Girls, Edna Petunia and I will receive our guest in the formal parlor. And no overhearing!" Cletus warned his daughters. They never had bad intentions, but living in a house with so many women meant constant eavesdropping.

Once they'd all walked into the formal parlor and taken their seats, Cletus coughed loudly and addressed Charles. "Son, you'd better tell me why you're here right quick. It's practically the middle of the night, and I am not a happy man when I have to lose sleep."

Charles spoke quickly. "Yes, sir, I completely understand. I'll be out of your hair soon, I hope. I wanted to come here tonight because I wanted to ask for permission to marry your daughter."

"You will have to specify which one." Cletus tried to keep a straight face, but he couldn't help but chuckle at his joke.

Edna Petunia elbowed Cletus in the side, eliciting a grunt. "He's joking, Charles. Continue."

"Betsy has really become a part of all of our family over the past few months. She stayed up all night with Amy, helping nurse her back to health. She found my brother Matthew when he ran away. She's always patient and loving. Sometimes, I'm too cross and strict with the children. Watching her interact with them has made me want to do a better job as their guardian. But I can't see how I could do it without her standing by my side." Charles finished his speech and took a deep breath, panting as if he'd run all the way to the Sanders house.

Cletus frowned. "Seems to me you've thought a lot about Betsy being a mother to your siblings...but you're asking for her hand in marriage. How are you so sure she's the woman for you?"

"And how do we know you don't just want full-time, live-in help? We won't support a partnership like this unless we know it's the right thing for Betsy," Edna Petunia slid a peppermint stick from her bosom and began to munch on it.

Charles did his best not to stare at the old woman's chest. He thought carefully about what he needed to say. "Ever since I met Betsy in the auction house, I was attracted to her beauty and spirit. Even if I didn't have my siblings to look after, I'd want to build a life with her and no one else. I vow to you, sir, I'll treat her with nothing but respect."

"Hmmm. Well, that's all well and good. When do you see yourself marrying? Assuming she says yes, that is." Cletus stroked his beard. "How long could you wait?"

Charles looked confused by the question. "Well, I'd like to marry Betsy this evening if I could," Charles saw Edna Petunia's face growing red. "But I'll wait for as long as is needed, sir. I care for Betsy very deeply, and will do whatever she's comfortable with—whatever you're all comfortable with."

"At least six months!" Edna Petunia thundered. She had been cheated out of planning six weddings for her adopted daughters—Penny's one-month engagement didn't count in her eyes—and she wasn't about to stand for one more. "It takes time to plan a proper wedding."

"Can you wait that long, son?" Cletus pressured.

Six months seemed like an eternity to Charles. But he realized it was the only way to convince the Sanders he was serious about their daughter. "Yes, sir. I can."

"Wonderful! I can go to bed!" Cletus cried. He stuck his hand out for Charles to shake, and Charles accepted it.

Charles turned to offer his hand to Edna Petunia, but she had dashed into the kitchen. "You don't suppose I could see Betsy tonight, do you?"

Cletus shook his head. "Not a chance. But I admire your style. Good night, son. We won't breathe a word to Betsy. We want you to ask her on your own, since it's an important question."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, son, I hope we'll see more of you soon. Take care. And please...next time, can you wait until the morning before you come to my house?" Cletus was smiling as he added the last part, so Charles thought he was joking—but it was really hard to tell.

Charles could hardly contain his excitement at work. He had a special evening planned for Betsy, but first he had to get through the day. Mr. Fitzsimmons seemed especially crotchety, scolding Charles for not writing neatly enough in the bank ledger and telling Betsy she'd missed a spot on one of the windows.

Betsy, on the other hand, was trying to figure out how to break it to Charles that she could no longer work for him. She kept trying to find a time to talk to him, but Mr. Fitzsimmons kept calling her attention to another chore or task.

Finally, at noon, Mr. Fitzsimmons decided to go out for his lunch. Charles and Betsy both rushed toward one another, each wanting to be the first to speak.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you tonight at the house," Charles didn't want to give away his surprise, but he also wanted Betsy to know how excited he was to see her outside of work.

"I can't work for you anymore," Betsy looked down at the floor. The thought of never seeing Amy or the boys again was almost too much to bear.

"What?" Charles was shocked. How could Betsy be saying this? He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her—she couldn't quit on him now.

"I'm sorry. I've grown too attached to your family, and it's not right. It's not fair to the children...or to me."

"Ah," Charles realized what Betsy meant. It sounded like she felt the same way he did, that she was already a part of the family. He could explain everything to her that evening. "Well, can I convince you to come one more time? Just to say goodbye?"

Betsy thought about it. Saying goodbye to the children would be horrible, but she felt she did owe them that. They were used to her consistent presence in their lives. It didn't feel right to abandon them. "Well, all right. But I'll just stop by—it will be a short visit."

"Of course," Charles hoped he would be able to convince Betsy to stay for much longer than she intended.

When Mr. Fitzsimmons returned from lunch, he was even crankier than he'd been that morning. "Where on earth is the blue teapot?"

Charles brought the large accounting ledger over to him. "Sir, it was purchased several weeks back. It's in the book."

Mr. Fitzsimmons grunted. "Hmph. That's right."

Betsy wished the afternoon would drag on, but it passed quickly. Mr. Fitzsimmons kept asking her to do different tasks.

For Charles, the afternoon couldn't go fast enough. After Mr. Fitzsimmons left, Betsy began to sweep the floors.

"I'm going to get a head start so I can make sure the children are doing their lessons. I'll meet you at the house," Charles told Betsy.

Betsy thought it was odd, but didn't question it. He was probably trying to build the distance between them now that she wasn't going to work for him any longer. In any case, she had work to do here. She finished sweeping and tidied up around the auction hall. Then she locked up and set out for Charles's house. The thing she was dreading most was little Amy's face. The girl clearly looked up to her and thought of her as a mother figure. It was going to devastate the girl to know that Betsy wouldn't be around anymore.

At the same time, Betsy didn't know what else she could do. She couldn't bear to be around Charles without being more to him than just the help. And what would happen when he did meet a woman he wanted to spend time with? The children would end up getting hurt even worse.

Betsy was near tears as she approached the Brooks house. She was surprised to see that none of the children were waiting on the porch. That was odd. She knocked on the door, and Samuel opened it.

"Welcome, miss," Samuel acted like a very fancy butler, taking Betsy's arm and escorting her into the kitchen, where Charles had set the table for dinner.

"Betsy Sanders, I've had eyes for no one else since the moment I first saw you. Watching you take care of my siblings has brought me a joy I never thought I'd know. You are already part of this family, so will you please do me the honor of making it official?" As Charles spoke, Amy handed Betsy a bouquet of tulips.

Betsy's jaw dropped. She couldn't believe what was happening. "Yes! I would love to."

Charles's face broke out into a huge smile. He hugged her tightly, then kissed her on the lips even though the children were right there. "You've made me the happiest man in the world."

"Betsy is our new mama!" Amy cried out. David began to dance a little jig right there in the kitchen.

Matthew took a casserole out of the oven. "We all worked together to make this for you while Charles was at work."

Betsy was touched. She knew the children didn't know much about cooking or cleaning, but it was so sweet that they had made an entire meal just for her! She knew that now she'd be a part of their lives permanently, she could teach them everything she knew. "Thank you very much."

"Now, I've already asked your father's permission for your hand in marriage, but there's just one small problem," Charles began.

Betsy felt her pulse quicken. "What's that?"

"Edna Petunia insisted on a six-month engagement."

Betsy burst out laughing when she saw the befuddled look on Charles's face. "That's because my other sisters who have married did it too quickly for her to plan their weddings. It's her dream to plan a wedding, and I won't deny her that."

"I see. Well, we can discuss the details later. We should eat before our dinner gets cold!" Charles helped serve the casserole onto the plates, and the family began to eat.

"Will Betsy have a baby now that she's our new Mama?" Amy asked.

Charles nearly choked on his casserole. "Not right away, Amy. Betsy and I need to be officially married before anyone can have a baby."

"I hope the baby is a sister. I can wait for a sister," Amy sighed as she pictured a baby girl. Charles and Betsy exchanged amused glances.

After dinner, the children said their prayers and went to bed. Matthew asked if he could stay up reading a bit and Charles said that was fine and gave him a small lantern to use.

Charles came up to Betsy and held her hand. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

Betsy nodded. Now that they were engaged to be married, she suddenly felt even more shy around Charles. She followed him outside.

Charles led Betsy out in the fields behind the house. "I can't wait until the day that you're my wife."

"I can't wait, either," Betsy truthfully didn't know how she would get through six long months. She already found herself wanting Charles to hold her and kiss her. She was curious about what else they could do together...but she knew she needed to wait until they were married to find out.

Charles leaned down and pressed his lips against Betsy's. She was surprised at first, stiff and unsure, but then she relaxed into Charles. They stood in the moonlight, gently swaying and holding each other. Charles continued to push into Betsy's lips, and she opened her mouth slightly. He ran his tongue over her top lip, and Betsy nearly shrieked. She had never felt anything of that magnitude before. It felt so remarkable that she wanted him to do it again and again.

At the same time, she also knew they were headed into dangerous territory. The further they went physically, the less sure Betsy was that she could control her behavior. "I think we need to stop."

Charles moaned. He knew Betsy was right, but he wanted nothing more than to explore Betsy's entire body. He knew it was wrong, that they needed to wait until marriage. But she was all he could think about. Six months would be torture. He realized that he had forgotten about the surprise he'd prepared for Betsy. "I have to show you something in the house. I promise, it's not inappropriate."

Betsy giggled and followed Charles back into the house. He made her sit down in the front room, and he disappeared into the pantry. He came out holding a small box. He handed it to Betsy.

Betsy felt the box's weight in her hands. It was a bit heavy. She opened the box carefully and pulled out an object wrapped in paper. She set the paper aside and took out the beautiful blue teapot from the auction house all those months ago. "Oh, my goodness!"

Charles smiled proudly. "I've known you were the one for me since the very beginning. When I saw how much you liked it, I immediately bought it from Mr. Fitzsimmons. Old man didn't even give me a cent's worth of discount, but it was well worth it to see the look on your face."

Betsy couldn't believe what a gorgeous and thoughtful gift Charles had bought for her. It was a sign that she had made the right decision. "I don't know what to say. Thank you so much!"

"For you, Betsy? Anything," Charles put his arm around his future wife.

Betsy wanted to sit with Charles for the rest of the evening, but she knew she had to be home. "I hate to say it, but I need to get going. Edna Petunia and Cletus have made me promise that as long as I live under their roof, I need to respect their rules and sleep there at night."

"I understand that, but I can't wait for the day when you live under this roof," Charles stood up and walked Betsy to the door. He kissed her goodnight, placing a hand on her hip as his lips brushed against hers.

Betsy felt a tingling sensation in her stomach. She took a deep breath. "Now I really need to go. Thank you for everything. I can't wait to be your wife."

Charles watched Betsy walk away, thrilled that things were finally working out for him. For the first time since his parents had passed, he felt like things were shaping up. He had the woman of his dreams. Six months would go quickly...wouldn't they?

“There’s the cakes, there’s the dresses, there’s the food, there’s the flowers—my, my, so much to do!” Edna Petunia clucked around the kitchen. A giant book of newspaper clippings and advertisements sat on the kitchen table.

Betsy felt miserable. She had only been engaged for two months, and it was pure agony. She hated attention, but since she was the bride, Edna Petunia was focusing all of her energy on Betsy. She had even stopped going all-out on planning the baptism for Penny’s baby, which was to take place the following day. Everything was focused on Betsy and Charles.

“What kind of cake do you want?” Edna Petunia had turned to her pictures of cakes she had seen before. She even had a few hand-drawn sketches she had imagined on Betsy’s behalf.

“I like plain old chocolate cake. I think that would be nice.” Betsy was just trying to go along with what she thought Edna would want. She didn’t even like cake that much, but she ate it whenever Edna Petunia made it because she didn’t want to upset her.

“No, no, no...plain chocolate won’t do for a wedding! It needs to have a twist or an elegant design.” Edna Petunia laughed at Betsy’s simplicity. “This is a *wedding*. It is a sacred, special, once-in-a-lifetime event! We will not be having plain old chocolate.”

This was how most of the wedding planning went. Betsy would say something that she liked or wanted, and Edna Petunia would tell her that was silly, and of course she actually had to do something else. But she still allowed Betsy to voice her opinion—so at the end of the day, Edna Petunia was planning the wedding that she felt was exactly the way Betsy wanted it.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was the weekend during the day, and Betsy wasn’t sure who it would be. She went to the door and opened it. She was ecstatic when she saw it was Charles.

“You’ve come to save me!” Betsy whispered, and Charles gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

Edna Petunia came to the entryway. “My future son-in-law! Come on in and give me a big kiss!”

Charles gave Edna Petunia a hug, and Edna Petunia grabbed his face and gave him a loud kiss. Betsy smiled. She loved her adoptive mother and all her eccentricities...even if some of the woman’s quirks were driving Betsy crazy.

“I came to see if Betsy needed a break from wedding planning.” Charles smiled at Betsy.

Edna Petunia frowned. “Why would she need a break? We’ve barely just begun! Maybe you can help us with the cakes!” Edna Petunia grabbed Charles’s hand and dragged him into the kitchen. She began to list all the possible cake batter and frosting options.

Betsy almost laughed in spite of her grief. Charles looked even more miserable than she felt. She coughed. “You know, I’m feeling a bit hot in here. I think I should go out for some air.”

“Yes, I should go with you!” Charles leapt to his feet.

Edna Petunia looked disappointed. “Hurry back! We have decisions to make!”

Once Betsy and Charles were out of the house, Betsy let loose. “I don’t see how I can handle four more months of this!”

“I don’t know, either. Sleeping without you at night is torture. You belong at the house with me, with all of us.” Charles stared into Betsy’s eyes. It seemed so unfair that their love should be denied for reasons that neither of them could control. “What are we going to do?”

Betsy smiled, a gleam in her eye. “I do have an idea...”

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THE FOLLOWING DAY, the entire Sanders family gathered at their church for baby Benjamin’s baptism. Micah would perform the service, then the group would adjourn outside for a picnic luncheon.

Betsy had volunteered to get to the church early to help set up. Charles and the children met her there. Although they weren’t yet married, he’d planned to attend the service to show his commitment to Betsy and her entire family.

Betsy brought a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies with her. She knew from her sister, Sarah Jane—Micah’s wife—that he had a soft spot for them. And she needed him to be in a good place for the huge favor she was about to ask of him.

“Good morning, Micah.” Betsy brought in the cookies and set them on Micah’s desk in the parsonage.

“Wow, thank you! I love these!” Micah bit into one of the sweet, chewy cookies. “Thank you for coming here early to set up.”

“Of course. I do have something to ask of you.”

Micah frowned. When one of Sarah Jane’s sisters wanted something from him, he usually ended up in trouble. “What is it?”

“I’m trying my best to do what’s right, but I don’t think I can wait another four months to get married to Charles. We love each other! And there are practical reasons, too. I’m not much of a help to him and his siblings living all the way across town with Edna Petunia and Cletus.” Betsy’s thoughts were jumbled. She didn’t know the best way to express what she was trying to tell Micah.

“What are you asking, Betsy?” Micah thought he knew where she was going—and he didn’t like it.

Betsy took a deep breath. “I’m asking—we’re asking—if you’ll marry us today. As part of the baptism or right before it. Micah, I’m trying so hard...but if I have to look at another dress or cake or top hat again, I might scream!”

Micah felt sorry for Betsy. The girl was near tears. He knew from Sarah Jane that Betsy was one of the sweetest and most thoughtful of all the sisters. She clearly was trying to keep Edna Petunia happy by going through the motions of wedding planning, even though it was making her miserable.

Betsy opened the door to Micah’s office and motioned for someone else to join her. “I’ve brought someone else to help me make my case, too.”

Charles strode into the room and greeted Micah. “Pastor.” Charles had left Matthew in charge of the younger children playing outside.

Micah shook his hand. “Good to see you, Charles. I understand you’ll be joining the family.”

Charles nodded. “Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

Betsy and Charles. I wish I could help you. But I still can’t help you.” Micah set his face in a stern line, and Betsy’s heart sank. If Micah wouldn’t help her, she would have to endure another four months of wedding planning torture. She felt panicked when she thought about walking down the aisle in a monstrous creation of a dress, holding flowers that would probably make her sneeze. Even worse, standing up in front of everyone for an hour or more—Edna Petunia insisted on planning each and every word of the ceremony.

“Micah, can I ask you a question?” Charles had a strange glint in his eye. Betsy hoped he wouldn’t say anything inappropriate.

“Of course.” Micah was always polite and willing to listen. He was an excellent pastor to his congregation.

“You’ve had a calling from God to preach, correct?” Charles began.

Micah nodded. “Yes, I did. What’s that got to do with this situation?”

“I’ve had a calling from God that this woman was sent here to be my wife. My life was in a disarray. My parents had died. I was doing a terrible job as a guardian for my younger siblings. I was unhappy with myself and everyone around me. And then I met Betsy.” Charles’s voice shifted and took on a lighter tone. “She was the breath of fresh air that I never knew I needed. Ever since I met her, my life has been nothing short of fantastic. She’s my family. I know it, God knows it, Betsy knows it, my siblings know it—and now we need to be married and recognized officially by the church as man and wife.”

Betsy loved how Charles had put it. She couldn’t have explained it any better herself. He was such a complex and intelligent man. He was right—it was about time everyone else realized what she and Charles had known from the start.

“That’s very compelling. I see your point. But I still can’t help you.” Micah set his face in a stern line, and Betsy’s heart sank. If Micah wouldn’t help her, she would have to endure another four months of wedding planning torture. She felt panicked when she thought about walking down the aisle in a monstrous creation of a dress, holding flowers that would probably make her sneeze. Even worse, standing up in front of everyone for an hour or more—Edna Petunia insisted on planning each and every word of the ceremony.

“Please, Micah. I hope you’ll consider it.” Charles made one last attempt at changing Micah’s mind.

“I’ll think about it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to prepare my remarks for the baptism. Thank you both for coming to see me. I will pray on it.”

Betsy didn’t want to get her hopes up. She didn’t think Micah would change his mind. He had seemed very firm. But he was a man of his word, and she believed him when he said he’d think on it.

Betsy and Charles busied themselves getting ready for the baptism and the lunch. They set up food in small baskets on the tables so that after the service was over, everyone could come outside, sit down, and begin eating.

The other family members arrived as the morning continued. Betsy introduced Charles to her sisters and brothers-in-law.

“Always glad to meet a new brother-in-law!” Lewis, Ruby’s husband, exclaimed. “Good luck joining this family—you’ll need it.”

Charles wasn’t sure whether this was a joke or not, but he laughed and shook Lewis’s hand.

Betsy hadn’t told any of her sisters how she felt about getting married, so everyone continued to ask her dozens of questions about the wedding. Was she going to wear her hair down or pinned up? Would she wear white or ivory? Gloves or no gloves? Potatoes or green beans? Betsy smiled and tried to answer as politely as possible. But she was completely overwhelmed.

Finally, Sarah Jane announced that the services would begin in a few minutes. Everyone took their place in the pews of the church, anxiously awaiting the baptism.

Micah pulled Betsy and Charles aside. “I thought about what you said, and I prayed on it. The thing is, I can’t think of a single reason why I shouldn’t marry you today. You both love each other, so I won’t force you to wait. Are you ready?”

Betsy couldn’t believe their luck. She began grinning from ear to ear. She felt as if a weight had been released from her back. Charles grabbed her, picked her up in the air, and planted a kiss on her lips.

“Pastor, we can’t thank you enough!” Charles cried.

Micah grimaced. “Instead of your thanks, I think I’ll need your protection from Edna Petunia.”

Betsy nodded. He had a point.

“Would you like me to marry you as part of the baptism? It won’t add much time.” Micah opened his Bible and took out a paper full of his writing.

“Actually, would we be able to do it here? Just the three of us and his brothers and sister?” Betsy looked up at Charles and Micah pleadingly. “It’s just...I get so embarrassed and shy in front of crowds. It would be more special and meaningful if we did it now, on our own.”

"I'll respect whatever you both want." Micah allowed Betsy and Charles to discuss it.

Charles placed his hands around Betsy's waist. "Betsy, you know all I want in this world is to be your husband. We can get married in front of one person or one thousand people. It's completely up to you."

Betsy smiled. "You are so wonderful to me. Let's get married now, with just Micah and the children."

Charles smiled broadly and went outside to get the children. When they all came back in, Amy ran up to Betsy and gave her a big hug. "I knew you would be my mama soon."

"We're ready for you, Pastor." Charles held Betsy's hand and prepared for his marriage. It was happening faster than he'd imagined—and he couldn't be more excited.

"All right. Here we go." Micah unfolded his notes and began to run through the wedding service. After a few breathless minutes, he pronounced them man and wife.

"You may now kiss the bride." Charles bent Betsy back and kissed her so long and hard that Micah found himself blushing. "We should really go in and get to the baptism now."

Charles straightened up and smiled broadly. "Yes, sir."

Betsy gulped for air after the long kiss and straightened her skirt. She felt like her face was probably bright red. She tried to calm herself down as she, Charles, and the children took their seats in the small church.

"Where have you been?" Gertie hissed. "They were probably waiting for you!"

Betsy could only stifle a giggle. Gertie frowned. None of her sisters ever took anything seriously.

Micah baptized Benjamin with Penny holding the infant and Tom standing beside her, looking proudly at his growing family. Betsy found herself imagining the babies that she and Charles would eventually have. They certainly would have their hands full for a while with his younger brothers and sister – but someday soon, she hoped they'd have a child of their own.

After the service, the Sanders family exited the church and sat down at the tables to start their lunch. David began to run in a circle around the church. Amy stared shyly at all the other children. "Those are your new cousins!" Betsy whispered to her. Amy looked ecstatic.

"All right. What on earth is up with you two, grinning like two fools?" Edna Petunia pointed at Charles and Betsy. The newlyweds looked at each other.

"We have something to tell you." Betsy began gently. "We got married!"

Charles had never heard a sound as loud or shrill as the cry Edna Petunia produced in that moment. Once his ears had stopped ringing, he grabbed her hand. "We're very, very sorry, especially because we promised you we'd wait six months. But we felt it was more important to honor our commitment to God and to each other. We hope you'll find it in your hearts to forgive us and bless our marriage."

"That'll take time, son...that'll take time." Cletus came up behind them. "Edna, I'm going to take you for a little walk." Cletus sighed. He understood why these young people couldn't wait to get married—he'd felt the same way when he'd met Edna Petunia—but he hated the toll it was taking on his wife. Out of the lot of fifteen orphans, one of them could surely give the woman a wedding she could plan.

Once Edna Petunia and Cletus were out of earshot, Betsy's sisters surrounded her and Charles.

"Congratulations!" Theresa shouted.

"Welcome to the family!" Ruby clapped Charles on the back.

"Couldn't wait another minute, could you?" Frank, Evelyn's husband, winked at Charles. "I know the feeling!"

"I am so happy for you, Betsy!" Dorothy exclaimed.

Betsy glowed. She had her family, and she had Charles. Life was absolutely grand.



Ten months later, Charles rushed home from the auction house as fast as he could without damaging the small package he held in his hands.

When he got home, he admired the freshly-swept porch and newly-painted door. He went into the front room and saw Samuel, David, and Amy lined up in a row, following along in a book with their fingers. In front of them, Matthew was reading a story aloud.

Betsy rushed to greet him with a big kiss. He bent down and enjoyed her lips mingling with his own. He was a lucky, lucky man.

"I brought you something." Charles handed Betsy the package, and she set it down on the kitchen table.

"You shouldn't have! What's the occasion?"

"I don't need an occasion to give the woman I love a gift. Go ahead and open it!"

Betsy carefully unwrapped it. There were four separate objects wrapped in paper. She tore the paper off one and held it up to the light. "Oh, it's *stunning!*"

In all, there were four teacups with the same blue pattern as the tea pot Charles had bought her when they'd first met. Now she had an entire set.

"When I saw them, I knew I had to have them. Just like I felt when I saw you." Charles gave her another kiss on the lips, and Betsy found herself boldly pressing back. Now that she was a married woman, she was getting much more comfortable being physically intimate with her husband. Betsy sighed contentedly. She had a beautiful family and a wonderful husband. Like the tea set, she had also ended up in exactly the right place.



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